

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, 25 January 2026
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
James Knutsen

[3 Epiphany A: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1,5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23]

*You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." **
Your face, LORD, will I seek.

Say it with me.

*You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." **
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Andrew, Peter, James and John. Hardworking dudes. Strong, outdoor people, working in all kinds of conditions, often at night. Attuned to the water, the wind, the sky, and to one another's temperaments, rhythms and cadences, skills and shortcomings, as they worked together day after week after month after year. I imagine that, on a practical level, they knew something of what it meant to *be united in the same mind and the same purpose*, and knew what it was like when you weren't. I imagine their senses were acute, their intuition finely honed, their humor salty.

I can tell you from experience: Galilee, especially along the lakeshore, is beautiful. Today's Gospel offers a picture of Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee, and you might say it's like in Genesis 3, where the creator strolls through paradise at the time of the evening breeze, looking around for Adam and Eve. Jesus strolls, and looks, and he sees these fisherfolk, and we might add, recalling Genesis 1, that he saw that they were *good*.

Just as at this moment, the Lord sees you, and is contemplating your goodness. Yes, you. Now.

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[Jesus] says to them, "Come behind me, and I will make you fishers of humans." And, immediately abandoning the nets, they followed him.

I think it's probably as simple as this: As Jesus's voice reaches their ears, he is speaking in their hearts as well. Jesus speaks to them; they see and hear him, and everything has changed; a new world opens; they have never felt so alive.

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I learned something, preparing this sermon, very interesting, and I think very helpful, because, well, this fishers-of-people thing. The way that works in English, for me, is that we're invited to picture humans, ourselves included, as fish, and the call of the gospel yanks us out of our familiar, sustaining environment, into an utterly unfamiliar and unfriendly realm, a place of suffocation, until perhaps I'm banged over the head to put me out of my misery, and, at some point, later, somewhere, I'm lunch.

Really, Jesus? Is that how it is with you?

But maybe not. You might expect that the verb here, *to fish*, or *to go fishing* and the noun, *fisher*, or *fisherman*, would somehow resemble or contain the noun for *fish*, as they do in English. But no. In fact, the words in the Greek of the New Testament for fishing, or fisher, have no etymological connection to the noun for fish, the creature. *That* word, as you may know, is ἰχθύς. But, in the Greek, the verb "to fish" is ἀλιεύω, ("ha-lee-oo-oh") and the word for fisher is ἀλιεύς ("ha-lee-oos"). There is a noun embedded in these words, but it's ἅλας, or ἄλας: salt.

The verb means, literally, something like “to snatch out of the brine.”¹ (Granted, the Sea of Galilee was and is a freshwater lake, but the words for fishing and fishers were salty all the same).

“Come behind me, and I will make you snatchers-out-of-the-brine of humans.”

So, as I hear it, the metaphorical gravity shifts from fish (which literally isn’t there) to *brine*. The striking image here is of a human being immersed in brine. Fish belong in water. Humans do *not* belong in brine.

The brine metaphor complements the image of light that Matthew quotes from Isaiah:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.

A human being immersed in brine is, you might say, in the dark, in the shadow of death, and is being suffocated, not to mention pickled. To have been snatched out of the brine is not like being a fish out of water; more like, “Ahh, at last, I can *breathe!*” I can see clearly. Unpickled, I can *live*, I can learn and love and grow.

Maybe the unpickling takes time.

As Jesus invites Peter and Andrew, James and John to become snatchers-out-of-the-brine of humans, he is doing exactly that, to them. In his voice, his words, his presence, his face, there is light, there is life, there is suddenly fresh air to breathe that they didn’t know they were missing.

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What will this snatching of humans out of the brine look like? How will Jesus make them such agents of life and liberation? Where and how will he lead them, what will he show them?

*And [Jesus] went about in the whole of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good tidings of the Kingdom and healing every illness and every infirmity among the people. And word of him went out into the whole of Syria.*²

Whole. Every. Every. Whole. I can’t say I know for sure that Jesus visited absolutely *every* place in Galilee, or that he healed absolutely everyone there who was afflicted in any way. What the Gospel text does here is to paint a picture of Jesus and his ministry oriented to the whole.³ Jesus is oriented toward the *whole*, and toward *every*, and each, teaching everyone and healing everyone of every illness and infirmity.

Healing and wisdom and life and belonging for the whole, for everyone, illustrated here in the microcosm of Galilee.

This is what creation is supposed to look like.

This is what snatching humans out of the brine looks like.

And sometimes, as the story goes forward, it will look like confrontation. Increasingly, it will look like rejection. It will look like defeat. It will look like abandonment. It will look like death. *The message about the cross*, writes Paul, *is foolishness to those who are perishing*—to those still immersed in the dark, pickling brine—but *to us who are being saved it is the power of God*.

Because God has made the cross the flaming torch, the glowing molten core of the divine presence in the world. Nothing will overcome this love, this light.

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But an alternative view is prominent today:

² Matthew 4:23f; David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 6f.

³ “Oriented to the whole”, by the way is a good translation of the Greek adjective *katholikos*, which gives us our word “catholic.”

¹ Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 164. I owe much to Leiva-Merikakis’s comments on the whole of today’s Gospel, *ibid.*, 156-172.

“We live in a world, in the real world... that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time.”⁴

But *is* that really the *real* world? Or is that a pickled and suffocating world, immersed in darkness and the shadow of death, a world pickled in fear, envy, resentment, lies, and murder, an iron-law world indeed in which the word of the cross can only appear as foolishness? A world at once pickled and perishing.

I don’t mean one should pretend these things aren’t happening, in real situations to real people, and that we should not be responding in real ways, always aware that we, generally speaking, are still a bit pickled ourselves.

Paul doesn’t say we *are* saved, but that we *are being* saved. It’s a direction, a process.

We should not allow the brine, even when it’s a rising tide as it is today, to define what we regard as the really real, the *real* reality, the truth.

Only love is real, won’t fade away.

Evil is vacuous. It is empty. It is false.

And what *if* the life to which Jesus calls us, as he snatches us out of the brine, in which we can breathe as if for the first time, in which we can hear his voice, in which we can follow him, in which we can seek and see his face in every—every! every!—human being, in which we follow him in healing and teaching, and perhaps in confrontation, rejection, perhaps even death for his sake and in communion with his own suffering and death—what if *that* is the really real world, where we can learn and love and grow?

What if he is pulling us up out of the brine even in this moment, so that we can walk and breathe and celebrate and serve and make our witness in the

fresh air of God’s wondrous and redeemed creation?

What if we hear the voice of Jesus, and follow?

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⁴ White House deputy chief of staff for policy and homeland security advisor Stephen Miller, to Jake Tapper of CNN, 5 January 2026.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/06/us/politics/stephen-miller-foreign-policy.html>.