

Last week's Gospel reading was, essentially, the origin story of Jesus' first three disciples. After a long night of bad fishing, Jesus encourages them to go back out and drop their nets, again. The catch, now, is so enormous it strains the nets and even with help begins to sink the boats. Simon Peter and his two partners were overwhelmed, they were amazed – and when they finally brought the boats in, all three of them, the Gospel says, “left everything and followed Jesus.”

When we visualize this scene, I imagine most of us are thinking about *what* these three walked away from. A family business, an incredible catch of fish that was likely worth a lot of money, we might picture all their equipment, their boats and nets, all valuable assets. Our first pass might have us overlay the world we know onto theirs ... likely paying attention to all the stuff, stuff we might assume they owned, their financial security.

But, our world of today and the world of first century Galilee are entirely dissimilar. Fishermen then would not have been small-business owners, in fact they would have owned little to nothing, and even a hefty catch would have barely given those who did the fishing enough to survive on ... after all the taxes were extracted and fees paid for the right to fish etc etc..

I mention all this, because what we hear in our biblical texts, given the minds we bring to them shaped by our own world, can actually have us miss possibly a key teaching here. When those first disciples *left everything*, they left a life of grinding hard labor, the daily threat of not having enough to feed themselves or their families, they left unrelenting demands of an overbearing system that trapped the majority of people in brutal poverty, hardship, and suffering. Although not actually imprisoned, or actually enslaved, the lives of most people in Jesus' time were far from free.

This is what they left.

And, by leaving everything, they were also leaving their inherited understanding of the world and what they believed was their place in it all, they left behind everything that would have them live in a certain familiar and predictable way. To follow Jesus, they left behind their assumptions about what life is, and how it should or could be lived - all important comforts, even today.

This might seem as though it's an easier 'leave-behind' moment than walking away from all the stuff you actually own, but I think we can all attest to how incredibly difficult it is to change our minds, completely, especially about the way things are, or about how it all should be, and about how we, each, fit into it all. Ordinarily, leaving everything for an unimagined future would be a risk far too great for most of us to take.

And, that moment, taking the first step of a brand new Way can be a rush. It's a clean slate, new page, fresh start, it's a new day. Running on charged-instinct, and adrenaline, the journey begins. Leaving everything, the stuff of life and all the stuff of the mind, can, at least initially, surely, feel like a step into absolute freedom – all the burdens of life have been set down, true freedom is right up ahead.

But it's not yet.

If freedom is the "Promised Land," then, in the storytelling tradition of our Biblical texts, the wilderness is unavoidable. Soon the initial joy at breaking free will give way to doubt and disorientation. The Way will seem unclear, confidence at having made the right choice will start to wane, discomfort sets in, and then, perhaps frustration that it's all so hard, perhaps life before wasn't so bad after all, at least we understood how everything worked.

After years in the wilderness the ancient Israelites cried out to go back to Egypt, back to all the things they missed about their old life, even though that meant going back into enslavement. The wilderness is hard.

And so we might imagine, that, like the ancient Israelites, when the initial surge of new life passes, the disciples were likely left disoriented, afraid even, perhaps grieving all they've no longer got while struggling to keep trusting and believing; their sentence-making minds unclear on how to justify what they've done; their imagination struggling to envision what could possibly lay ahead. Suddenly, this 'freedom' has morphed into an extreme kind of poverty, they've set down *all* they had, stuff, ideas, expectations, even their understanding. Not knowing what's ahead can leave the mind starving for answers, a more distracting and demanding hunger than that of an empty belly; and the body can begin to crave the comforts of the familiar, feeling a deep grief for all that was once known and predictable.

And Jesus knows this.

And so, we come to today's Gospel reading. After calling his disciples away from everything they have ever known, aware of the irresistible power of that initial call and the inevitable wilderness struggle that lay ahead, Jesus assures them that they are blessed, in their poverty, in their hunger, in their grief.

Not *blessed* in the way the word often gets used today. Being blessed, here, is most definitely not comforting divine consolation for extreme hardship and suffering. Jesus is speaking here specifically to his disciples, not to the crowd. He's not speaking generally to those in poverty, to all those who don't have enough to eat, all those who are afflicted and weeping as they suffer in life.

Instead, he's speaking specifically to his disciples, those folks who have responded to the call and have left everything to follow him.

The Greek word for blessed, used here by the writer of Luke, has the same meaning as the word Happy, used by the psalmist – Psalm 1, word 1, we heard it just a bit ago. Happy or Blessed is our translation of the Hebrew word *Ashre*, a very important word in scripture indeed. *Ashre* is perhaps best understood as a deep state of peace, an abiding rightness that's found when living most fully into our relationship with God, our covenantal relationship with God and one another. It is the way in which we choose to live, that yields *Ashre*.

*Ashre* is a promised land, of sorts. One that can only be reached by choosing to stay in the wilderness, having been called by faith.

The happiness, blessedness, of *Ashre* can only be known if we choose the poverty of leaving behind the ways and the thinking we have always known, the way it's always been; choose the hunger of not having the answers, of not knowing how it will all pan out; choose the grief of separation from all that is familiar and predictable. The call of our faith leads us all to this place, but we won't all choose to take the risk of leaving everything to follow Jesus.

Being a Christian is risky if we choose the Way, we don't know how it'll be or feel or where we'll end up, but our faith binds us to the promise of *Ashre*, of abiding deep peace, rightness, strength in our inseparability from God. This is our Promised Land, in which we will think, act, and choose set free from the life-limiting churn of self-obsessed cultural forces.

Being in the world right now is hard.

If we want true lasting change, true peace and justice, we are called to transform, in love, by faith, trusting that this is how we will, collectively, transform this world.

Yes, it feels very risky to think about leaving everything to follow Jesus, to choose to go into the wilderness. Lent is coming. This is the call. *Ashre* is the promise.