

“CHOICES”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
By The Rev Alex Lysdahl
Jan. 4, 2026
(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture today is Matthew 4:12-25.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”*

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, people possessed by demons or having epilepsy or afflicted with paralysis, and he cured them. And great

*crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea,
and from beyond the Jordan.* *NRSVue*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This past week my husband and I went to Michigan to celebrate Christmas with my husband's family. My in-laws live up there. To those of you who pay attention to the news, we did not go on Monday like planned. It was pretty rough on the roads, so we went on Tuesday.

The first morning that we were up there we went out to brunch with the family. We heard all about my 4-year-old nephew's bestest friend. We'll call him Owen for anonymity, but my nephew said he really, really liked playing with Owen and then my sister-in-law chimed in. She told us that her and my nephew's dad really liked Owen as well and they liked play dates with Owen because my nephew and Owen usually made good choices when they played together, which wasn't always true of my nephew and some of his other friends from school.

A little bit later my nephew was showing us different goofy faces he could make and he said, "I can even roll my eyes." Then he paused and said, "but that's not making a good choice."

My husband and I cracked up because isn't that true of all of us, that we don't always make the best choices? We even have friends who are good influences and we have friends who don't always help us make the best choices, but we have choices that we have to make.

We make choices all day every day – choices to say yes to some things and no to others. When someone asks us to do something we often say things like, "I can't" or "I'm busy", but it's a choice that we make to not do that thing. Right?

Another way of responding to it, could have been, "I can't do X because I chose to do Y instead. Both are true. We make choices. We have human agency. Everything is a decision in our lives and sometimes we don't like the choices in front of us. Sometimes we feel like we don't have the energy to make the choices but by not choosing, we are still making a choice. Right? We are choosing not to make a choice. Don't think too hard about it, just life choices.

And sometimes the only choice is to respond to the decision that someone else made to a poor decision and we have to respond to that. This constant decision making

that we have to do each day is real and we can get to a point where we are overwhelmed by the amount of decisions that we have to make and they have given it a name, the smart people. The psychologists call it decision fatigue where we have so many options in the day that we are overwhelmed and it actually influences our decision-making capacity and we start to make poor decisions because we have decision fatigue.

There are famous people who have tried to help offset the decisions that they have to make each day and they've done that by wearing one or two outfits. Think of Steve Jobs, President Obama, Zuckerberg. They have like the same shirt and the same pants they wear every single day. They have multiples so they don't get stinky, but it's the same clothing. They don't have to decide anything. They just have to do their laundry.

They've done that to try and limit the amount of decisions that they have to make so that they have space to make other important decisions like in the middle of running the company. Because we have big and small decisions to make, right? We have the smaller decisions like to use a blue pen or a black pen. That might be a big decision for some people.

But then we have bigger picture decisions like whom we will follow. In Matthew 4: Jesus calls Simon Peter and James and John and Andrew and he calls them to follow him. In the words of Bible commenter, Audrey West, Jesus calls them as they are, from where they are, being who they are.

Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John are in the middle of their everyday lives. Where are they? They're fishing. Who are they? They are ordinary fisher people and Jesus calls them to follow and they do. They choose to follow Christ.

It says of Simon Peter and Andrew, that they **immediately** left their nets and followed Jesus. And then James and John **immediately** left their boat and their father to follow Jesus. All four of them make the choice to leave what they were doing, to follow Jesus. We don't have a lot more context. We don't know why it was so fast, but that immediately sure gets your attention, doesn't it? We don't know much but we do know that they chose, they made the decision to follow Christ.

Every day God calls us to follow God's Word and every day we have to choose. We have to choose daily to live into our calling as Christians. To follow Christ's teachings. It is not a one and done decision. It is a daily choice. Almost a minute

by minute sometimes choice to love God and our neighbors, to follow the example that Christ has set.

When the Holy Spirit is guiding us to do something and some of you are like, well, Holy Spirit, that's kind ofThink of that inner voice, that gut feeling, that still small voice, or the wisdom of a friend or family member. The Holy Spirit guides us in a variety of ways, but when the Holy Spirit is guiding us to do something, or say something, or care for someone and we respond with "I can't" or "I'm too busy", we are effectively saying, I have chosen something else and that is a choice. It's a choice.

Some of you may be sitting there and saying, "I've got this covered." Perhaps you are already loving God and your neighbor all day, every day, perfectly. If that is you, kudos. This sermon is just affirmation that you are an amazing person. Good job. Keep it up. But most of us are human. Most of us are imperfect. Just look at the news.

We are imperfect and we need the reminder of our calling and that reminder that we have choices to make. Because just like the disciples Jesus calls us to follow him, just as we are, from wherever we are, being who we are. And that can feel a little heavy. I know, but you know, sometimes things are heavy.

Here's some good news. One of the things I love about this passage is that Jesus calls his disciples in pairs. Simon Peter and Andrew. James and John. Sure, they're brothers, but they are still called in pairs and there is biblical precedent. We see throughout the Bible of God calling people in pairs.

There is biblical precedent to not going at it alone and so my suggestion to you as you have all these choices to make as a Christian is to find a buddy. Find your own Owen. Think of my nephew and find someone who will help you make good choices. In theory this church is full of Owens, so you can pick someone.

The good news in this passage is also in verses 23 and 24. Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom and cured and healed people. So that means that when we make daily decisions to follow Christ, we are not choosing to follow a flimsy concept, something that feels good. We're not choosing to follow a dictator or a mob. Following Christ is a powerful choice and it is one of good news and healing. It is one of helping and curing. It is one of loving and reaching out to the marginalized. That is who we follow.

It is a new year. It is 2026 already and I think it's a great time to evaluate our choices. It is a great time to decide how you will respond to God's call on your life and what you will choose to do.

Amen? Amen.