

**“Beyond the bush-line – taking adventurous paths”, a sermon based on Isaiah 9:1-4 and Matthew 4:12-25 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on 26 January 2019.**

We had a week tenting on the shore of Lake Benmore near Omarama at the top of the Waitaki Valley. One day we drove up Quailburn Road towards the mountains to the Ahuriri Valley. The road quickly became gravel, with much dust because of the dry weather. At the end of the road is an historic woolshed built in the 1920s. And nearby an early and very basic homestead. Important historically because it was the location of some of the first farms in the Mackenzie country. Two Scots arrived there, but which land were they to farm, north or south? So they decided to have a horse race and the one who came first could decide. Beyond the woolshed is a valley with a stream and a track. So we walked along the track, criss-crossing the stream, taking careful steps - steep sides, slippery rocks, fallen branches, but it was sheltered and still and well-protected.

The track was called “to the bushline”. And after a while, that is where we arrived. The bush ended suddenly. Here there were trees, then there was scrub, mainly matagouri. We wanted to explore further, so we started along a steeper path, towards the mountains. We left the protection of the trees, the sound of the stream, and we entered a place more exposed. The wind more obvious. The heat more intense. The environment less protected. We had a sense that the cloud could quickly emerge from behind the hills to surround us and the temperature would drop.

And as sometimes happens, I had a thought, or perhaps it was a question. I think it’s time for Knox to reclaim again its history of going beyond the bush-line. It’s time for adventure. That is the nature of this church. This building is an emblem of adventure. In some of his writing, the first minister Dr Stuart sets out all the reasons people gave for not building it: they didn’t have the money, the future was too unclear, too much was uncertain. But here it is. And now, in our day. I hear people speak about how they have come to faith or reclaimed their faith or found their faith again or risked return to the church they thought they had finally left, I hear of people venturing, of going to what for them are frontiers of new meaning and fresh spirit and exploratory faith. Adventure is our history and identity.

One gains a sense that over recent years many congregations have been carefully picking their way over slippery rocks and uneven paths. And we have reached the bush-line again. It's time for us to reclaim our identity as an adventurous people. To go again beyond the sheltered and protected and known.

But it carries risk. Risk of unfavourable winds and changing conditions and insecure resources. For churches especially, the idea of security and certainty is a phantom. It isn't who we are. It isn't how God deals with us. It isn't how we are called to live. Those congregations that do not risk are those that gradually fade away.

Let me give a simple example of what adventure might mean. Last week, I received a letter from Presbyterian Support Otago. It offered us the opportunity to visit a Support project. The easiest path would be – we don't really have the time or the resource or perhaps enough people who would be interested. It will take too much effort to organise. But I was amid writing this sermon, so I thought – what is the adventurous option here. I hope we enable as many of us as possible to spend time at one of the services offered by Support, and see where it takes us. The more often we make those choices, the more adventure becomes our way of being.

For me personally, the church has been a place of adventure. From the time when as an adult I came through a Presbyterian church door to a strange place and people, with its ritual and imagery I had to learn. Within a few months I was in a group studying the book of Ephesians – what an adventure. Then into a group of young people who ran a coffee shop in mid Auckland, in an attempt to witness to our peers. I learned to pray in a group for the first time. And when our church got a new minister, we visited every house in the neighbourhood, in pairs. New challenge after new challenge.

The readings today invite us to adventure. It's there in the names of Zebulun and Naphtali. Zebulun was a tribe with a special territory, at the southern end of Galilee. An outpost at the edge of the land of the Gentiles. It bore the brunt when foreign nations invaded, always the first land armies conquered. Zebulun means dwelling or home. From its outset as a newly liberated nation, Israel has to find its home on the boundary with other nations. And Naphtali. Naphtali was a child borne by Rachel's servant Bilhah to Rachel's husband Jacob. This led Rachel to exclaim "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won." So Naphtali means "struggle", the struggle of a wife whose

husband had a child to another woman. Naphtali has a history of uncertainty and insecurity. These names of Zebulun and Naphtali were so marginal, that by the time of Jesus, they were no longer used.

So in reviving these lost names, Matthew is making a point. That the home of Jesus is in the soil of struggle and on the edge of what is acceptable. That the ministry of Jesus emerges amid insecurity and uncertainty.

And that is where Knox church and every congregation are now located. In the mid-sixties the census recorded the first plunge of numbers of people who publicly identified with the Christian faith. Since then the downward trajectory has been unrelenting. So the church has had to learn to make its home in Zebulun and Naphtali, in what is uncertain and insecure. It's not an aberration. It is not a lesser way of being. It doesn't represent failure. This is our home, where we now live. Beyond the bush-line. What an adventure!

And in that context Jesus says - **“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”** It's not a nice image for our relationships with people. That we cast nets and drag people into the kingdom of God. Jesus is using an image that makes sense to the people he is addressing. For fishermen, the image of fishing. Perhaps if you are a carpenter, he might say, I will make you shape people for the reign of God. Or if you are a student, he might say - follow me and I will make you learn for people for the reign of God.

We might not like the image of fishing, yet that is what happens. What led me to Jesus and what prompts me to venture now - he tangata, he tangata, he tangata. How do we get drawn into the realm of God? Its people. Its God working through people like us. So in this insecure and uncertain place which is our home, we are called to the adventure of building relationships with neighbours. Going to people, to where they are. To help them sense the realm of God in their daily lives, to help people sense the presence of God with them.

**“They left their boat and their father and followed him.”** They left their work and their father. They left what had given their life structure and purpose. They shifted their perspective and reimagined their lives and its purpose. What an adventure.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes how it happens: “This is not a story about us,” she writes. “It is a story about God, and about God’s ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who are able to follow — able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for and because he seems to be food.”

Its adventure time. The adventure of life in the Spirit as we subject our living to God’s loving scrutiny. The adventure of neighbourliness, helping people sense the realm of God and respond to God where they are. The adventure of responding to the call – Follow me and I will make you – without knowing where we will end up. The adventure of being part of the ministry and mission of Jesus, as we live in the home of insecurity and uncertainty.

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