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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kick-start.

We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson. I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger.

They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.

You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they're pretty good preachers.

All right, let's get started.

David, where are we in the church year?

David: We're the third Sunday after Epiphany, a time when the church celebrates the revelation of Christ and his mission to all nations.

Jessica: And Peter, what are the texts this week?

Peter: The texts are from Isaiah 9, 1 Corinthians 1, Matthew 4, and Psalm 27.

Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me which texts you would choose to preach about to determine who goes first.

In our gospel, we read about Jesus calling fishermen and being fishers of men.

Do you guys like to fish?

Peter: I love fishing.

The right kind of fishing, though.

Jessica: Okay.

Peter: I like fly fishing, stream fishing, going after the fish.

But fly fishing is a lot of fun.

Jessica: Nice.

David, do you fish?

David: I fished when I was a kid.

And there's only one part that I really like.

And that is when you're pulling the fish in.

But cleaning the fish...

Jessica: Yeah, I like fishing, but I don't clean the fish.

So, yes.

Peter: You like to fish, not really fishing.

Jessica: Let me say this again.

I like to go fishing.

I can put the worm on the hook.

I can take the fish off the hook.

I like looking at the cool fish and then releasing it into the wild.
So, I guess, Peter, you win because you liked... No, no, no.
David, you win.
Because you don't like to clean the fish either.

David: Okay.

Jessica: Good.
So, you win.

David: Thank you.

Jessica: A little surprise turnaround there.

David: So, I'm looking at the gospel reading.
And actually, I'm just... You know, we've got Jesus calling the disciples.
And in a really small period of time, things go huge, right?
So, he calls the first disciples, and then he's got these crowds that are following him.
And we're in Matthew 4.
We're building up to the Sermon on the Mount when he's got all the people.
So, got a really fast buildup of disciples coming in Matthew 14.
But I really want to focus just on kind of one verse in its context.
Jessica, if you could read verse 12.

Jessica: Now, when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.

David: Okay.
I like that verb, withdrew.
He withdrew into Galilee.
He, you know, he didn't just leave one place, but he was withdrawing from it.
Things were changing.
The imprisonment of John the Baptist, or the arresting of John the Baptist,
caused Jesus to change plans to withdraw.
And the beautiful thing is that you've got that opening
verse where there's kind of this change of plans.
And then you have a prophecy that's being fulfilled.
And you have disciples who are following Jesus.
And you have him traveling throughout all of Galilee, performing these miracles.
And so you've got God blessing this moment when things had to change.
So for me, it's kind of like, I don't know if I'd say it
this way, but I think that we have a God of the wrong turn.
You know, there are times in life when we change our plans, when we withdraw,
when we have to go in a new direction.
We make a decision that we make a decision that we didn't want to make, or we immediately
regret.
We're changing.
And anytime you make the wrong turn, you think, oh, man, things got really screwed up.
And yet in this case, when Jesus is withdrawing, when Jesus is changing,
it's actually fulfilling God's prophecy.

And it's something that God blesses amazingly.

And so we have a God of the wrong turn, a God who will take these moments in our lives where we're kind of changing our plans and use them to bless them.

I don't know.

I'm kind of a planner.

So I, you know, I really like thinking about how my whole day is going to go.

Making a wrong turn, having to do last minute changes does not work for me, because I'm like, man, I wish I could have done that.

It would have been so better if I could have done that, but I had to do this instead.

And I need to be reminded sometimes that when I'm doing these wrong turns, or I'm making these change of plans, that God's still in control.

Peter: Well, that's really the big takeaway here, because when you, the reason some people have trouble with changes of plans is that things don't go well. You've seen how, you've seen what can happen when you take a wrong turn and how things can go south.

David: Or in your imagination, they don't go as well as they would have gone if you had been able to do what you had intended to do.

Peter: Right.

But if you've got one who is in control, who is in charge, who is good and gracious, and who will work through that, then that's a whole different ballgame.

David: Right.

And I mean, I think of like the Macedonian Christian is calling Paul to come to Macedonia.

He had wanted to go to Asia, but the spirit prevented him.

You know, and so here's his intentions.

He's having to change his intentions.

And yet, changing his intentions brings out all of this fruit of mission for the Lord, that we have a God who's a God of the wrong turns.

And I think sometimes we look at our lives and we're like, yeah, I probably shouldn't have done that.

Or maybe, I wonder what would have happened if I had gone the other way.

Peter: Well, you know, you say it wrong turn, but in the end, it's the right turn.

David: It is, right.

Peter: And so, you know, it's almost a God who takes wrong turns and makes them right.

David: Makes them right.

Because, I mean, we can see that all sorts of places where we have plans how things should

Peter: go.

And sometimes the spirit leads in ways that we didn't originally think maybe we'd go there.

David: Right.

Peter: And that maybe that even turns out to be the right turn.

David: Right.

Peter: In hindsight.

David: Right.

And so we've got Jesus withdrawing.

And then Matthew immediately hits us with, and this is to fulfill the prophecy.

You know, so all of a sudden, it's like God already knew you'd be making that withdrawal.

There was already a prophecy about it.

And yet, you know, you are withdrawing, and yet you're actually fulfilling the plans of God.

And that God is going to work through these changes, these, you know,

these last-minute moments where you switch and you go another direction.

That God is going to work through those.

And so it's a passage, I think, that invites us to

trust God being in control when we're obviously not.

Jessica: There are so many times that you would like to be in control, but you're not.

That's really encouraging to know that somebody is going to watch out for you.

And now it's time for the Ask Jessica jar, the part of the show where we pick a

question from the jar, and I answer it from the perspective of a person in the pew.

All right, David, pick a question.

David: Okay.

What might be the response of a teenager in the pew?

Jessica: My experience with young adults is that if they are seeking to do God's will in their mind, it means that they must follow the dots.

And what does God want me to do?

What college should I go to?

What girls should I date?

You know, and so, and if I mess it up, then I'm messing up my life.

David: Right, I agree with you.

I agree with you.

And there's like this, it's almost like they imagine themselves to be a little

mouse in a maze, and they have to choose the right direction because everything's mapped out.

And so the point of the sermon is that, you know, you may think that it was a

wrong decision or you did the wrong turn, but God

is in control and he's able to use it, and he will.

So, I mean, that would be kind of the good news, I would think.

Jessica: That would be such good news for the teens and the young adults that I've worked with.

And even thinking back when I was a teen or a young

adult, that would have been good for me to know.

Even as a parent, you labor over, what school should I send my kids to?

What sport should I let them be in?

You know, should we let them go and start sleepovers when they're 10 or when they're 13?

Like all those thousands of decisions.

David: When do I let them have a phone?

Jessica: Right, right.

And that's a good reminder that God will still work even if my decision isn't what I thought the perfect decision would be.

David: Right.

Jessica: That's very comforting.

Thank you, David.

What about you, Peter?

What would you preach on?

Peter: Well, I also was drawn to the gospel reading this week.

But I didn't start at the beginning.

So the first, you know, as I looked at this text, there's kind of the fulfillment of the Isaiah passage.

It's almost like three texts kind of put together.

You've got the withdrawal and the fulfillment, and then you've got the calling of the disciples, and then you've got Jesus' ministry.

What struck me was the third of the three sections, this beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Would you read verses 23 to 25, Jessica?

Jessica: And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and

proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures and paralytics, and he healed them.

And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and from Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.

Peter: It struck me just as you were reading that, Jessica, all Galilee, every affliction, every disease, all the sick, great crowds.

He's just been baptized in chapter 3.

He was tempted at the beginning of chapter 4.

He withdraws at the beginning of our reading for today.

He calls some disciples.

And then, what a start.

David: Boom.

Boom.

Peter: I mean, to start a ministry with that kind of healing and exorcisms and teaching and preaching, what a fantastic start to the ministry.

And I've thought about how, you know, we're familiar with people who have big starts, right?

You know, sometimes if you follow sports teams, they'll, you know, they'll start

the season with a winning streak where they, you know, the hopes are high because they're just killing it to start. Or you think about, you know, a politician catches fire early on and just captures everybody's imagination and has huge rallies. You think about a career. You know, you begin a new career and things just click and they go really well. You think about a marriage that, you know, you have this new relationship and you get married and it's wonderful for just a little while. And with each of these, you have this big start. But then things, at some point, begin to fade.

David: Now I'm thinking Nicolas Cage's career.

Peter: You get these incredible starts where there's not... The sky's the limit and the outlook is so great. And so often that then turns or it flattens or it fizzles or it fades. And I was just thinking about Jesus' ministry and just follow the Gospels, right? I mean, take Matthew, for instance. You know, he's doing all this incredible stuff early on. He's got this great sermon he's writing in the background that's going to come out the next couple of weeks. And then slowly but surely, everybody starts to question and turn and plot and the disciples get even more confused and people start to leave. And of course, then he's finally all alone on the cross as this fantastic start just didn't quite pan out. And so I'm playing with this idea of this big start and the optimism and the excitement. I mean, sometimes this happens like with people and their relationship with Jesus, right? You know, I think about some people that I know who became Christians later on in life and they're so excited and it's, you know, they grasp the Gospel for the first time, maybe, and the thrill of sins forgiven and innocence before God and hope is just overwhelming. But that's hard to sustain, right? And so I'm thinking about a big start and then my mind as I was thinking about this big start language, you know, there's a big finish coming. When Jesus returns and all creation will be restored, these few verses in Matthew's Gospel are going to seem like just the very beginnings because everything will be renewed. You know, Jesus is going to come with the trumpets and on the clouds and raise the dead and all the new creation and we've got this huge finish and that will surpass even the big start.

David: Oh, that's nice.

Peter: And here we are in the middle.

David: Right.

Peter: And so I was thinking about, you know, life in the middle or kind of the, you know, sometimes even in the middle here, so we're between Jesus' beginning and the end.

And sometimes things in the middle are really clicking and they're really hopping and things are going great. We've all had times probably in our personal lives and in our ministries and our congregations where things are just going well. And then that never lasts because there's always the valleys too. And there's these times that are tough and we go through personal crises or relational crises and I wonder how many people in your congregation are in that low spot now. I'm guessing there's quite a few. And so I want to help people think about, okay, in light of this big start and in view of the coming, huge finish, how do we help people live through this time of challenge and trial and difficulty? I think about the disciples, just the verses before you read, Jessica. I mean, they must have, you know, they had just left him or they had just left their home. They've just started following Jesus. And the first couple of months must have been just the greatest wild ride they've ever heard of. All the excitement, all the events that happened. But of course we know there was the trough or the valley that led before Jesus' death, which is about as low as it gets. And then you've got the resurrection and you've got Pentecost, which is another, you know, big kind of restart almost. But then inevitably there were times in the disciples' lives, and we know a lot about Paul's life, kind of the ups and downs he experienced, but they went through challenges and trials and difficulties. And so this movement is kind of what I want to think about. I think when you are in these middle, life in the middle, and maybe I would try to organize the sermon a way to reflect on how you could make sense of life in the middle when it's not the big, exciting times. One way to make sense of it would be to question, you know, maybe I'm doing something wrong. Maybe I've got to get my stuff together and make some changes. And maybe you do need to make some changes. But that doesn't necessarily mean that God is upset with you or that God is somehow getting you or something like that. So maybe I would do, as I'm thinking out loud here, Dave, I'm thinking about maybe a question-answered sermon.

David: That's what I was thinking.

Peter: Where you kind of ask, how do we exist between the big start and the big finish or something like this?
Right.

David: What's the final answer going to be?

Peter: Well, let me give a second.

David: Let me give you a second and a false one.

Peter: Let me give you a second false answer.
It would be, and I think this is actually a real problem in the church, is we grow apathetic.
We're just kind of coasting.
And I think it shows up sometimes when the things we argue about and the fight over,
we start to focus on little things, on minor details instead of the big picture.
But I'd want to help the hearers identify with the disciples, I think.
How do we go forward?
We go forward even when we don't understand listening to Jesus.
We go forward following through both good times and bad, times that are exciting and
times that are not, times that are difficult.
And that's kind of the life of discipleship.

David: How do you live in the middle?
You live by thinking your life with God is...
Let's think through this.

Jessica: Well, I know one of the possible answers of how you feel is despair, right?
Here I was completely successful at something, and it was going well,
and I thought that that's what I could do, and that was who I was.
And then it crashes.
And you're like, well, now what?
Am I always going to not be able to do as well as I did?
Like, have I already hit my peak, and now I'm just
useless, and I can't serve, and I'm not good anymore?
I don't know.
I've seen people go through despair when things have gone well, and then they
crash, because it doesn't feel like they're in the middle.
They think they're at the end.
There's not hope coming.
That would be helpful for me.

Peter: Yeah, I'm trying to figure out...

David: So, maybe the question could be something like, how do we live in the middle?
The first answer is, we live with guilt, because God is punishing us.
The second answer is, we live with apathy, because my Christian life is a routine.
The third could be, we live with despair, because, you know, it's all fallen out.
And then the fourth would be, we live with hope.

Peter: Because I want to encourage people to be faithful with the little things.

David: Okay.

Peter: The big start, the wild ride to begin, and the big ending, it's the little things
in the middle, life in the middle, where you attend to the individual people,
the individual situations.
It doesn't need to be this, all of Galilee, and all the healing, and every disease.
We go forth faithfully with the individual circumstances and the little things in

life, in light of the ending that's coming.

Jessica: Yes, that is so great.

I can think about times in my life where I felt like I had a huge sphere of influence, and I was helping people, and everything was going great.

And then when it wasn't, someone reminded me to focus on the little sphere of influence that I have then.

You know, if things, if the huge youth group is not there

anymore, how many kids are there, and what do they need from you?

Or maybe when I stayed home with my kids, this baby is my sphere of influence, and it might seem small and insignificant, but that's what God has given me.

And so to focus on that little thing, that's helpful.

David: Well, you know, I remember Fred Craddock had that example where he said that when he was a kid, he wanted to be martyred, and he wanted to give his life for Jesus, but nobody was killing Christians at the time.

And he said, but then now that I've gotten older, I realized that God was asking for my life, not in one big check, but by a few cents here and a few cents there my whole lifetime. And that's kind of that picture also.

Peter: That's what I want to help people live toward, this trust and the promise of both the huge start that was in our text and, of course, in the resurrection, and then the huge finish when the Lord returns, and in the meantime, live faithfully in kind of the middle part.

Yeah.

Jessica: Great.

Thank you, Peter.

Now it's time for the Jessica jar.

Peter: What questions might be left after this sermon?

Jessica: I think the message of what to do in the middle is really relatable and applicable, because don't we live most of our life in the middle of our life?

And it's good to be reminded that God is still working through us, and he is with us, and we don't sink into despair or apathy or guilt.

Help us know how to do it.

The only questions that I will have now, because I like this idea, is like, okay, how do I do it?

And so maybe some examples of ways that we could bring that into our life.

David: Well, your example of your sphere of influence and having a child that's been given to you to care for is a really good example of that.

Peter: Yeah, I mean, you could be hyper-local here and invite people to imagine a single person in their life that by following Jesus, they would interact with that person just a little bit differently and kind of help them see the value in that and also not to think of it as with too much pressure or too much expectation.

Jessica: That's great.

I've had friends who have retired, and then they struggle with this, where they had a job where they were in charge of a lot of people, and now they've retired, and it was great at first, and now they're back from the cruise, and they don't quite know what to do. And I've heard that from a number of different people, and that would be helpful for folks in that position too. Great.

Thank you, Peter.

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I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.

Join us next week here at Lectionary Kick-start when Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger will spark your thoughts for next Sunday.

Peter: I like fly fishing, stream fishing, going after the fish, kind of...

David: Reach down to get your fish out of the mud?

Peter: No, I use a rod.
Is that called noodling, I think?

David: Noodling or something.

Jessica: Don't say noodling on the show.