

- Our gospel lesson for this morning comes from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. What is happening here is that Jesus has been baptized, that is to say he has been ordained for his ministry. Then he has had that baptismal identity, that ordination vow, tested by the tempter and now, his ministry is about to begin. Listen. 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 drawn near." As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers. Simon, who was called Peter and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea, for they were fisherman. 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 they followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. This is the word of the lord. Several years ago, when I had come down here to preach in Duke Chapel on Saturday, I was thumbing through the Raleigh newspaper and my eye happened to fall on an absolutely fascinating classified ad. It read, "For sale, hot tub complete with plumbing, "will trade for pickup truck." (Laughing)

- I thought to myself, now then there is a life in major transition. (laughing) I could imagine that the placer of that ad was getting rid of the hot tub, the avocado facials, the chardonnay, the alfa romeo, in with a baseball cap, lumberjack shirt and the Chevy half-ton. I'm changing my life. Sometimes, people do change their lives, dramatically and suddenly and when they do, it is fascinating to us. Where do they get the freedom to do it? Where do they get the brashness? Where do they get the venturesomeness to change their lives? I've been interested to read in the papers in the last few months about how many US congressman and senators have already announced they are not seeking re-election this year. Many of them are in safe seats, they could easily be re-elected, they have reached the pinnacle of political power and ambition but they're changing their lives. I want something simpler, I wanna reduce the pressure. I want some freedom and some meaning I don't have. A number of years ago, when the late Bart Giamatti resigned from the presidency of Yale University, he became the commissioner of baseball and he looked for all the world like a kid who had run away and joined the circus. He changed his life dramatically and suddenly. That fascinates us! What about the corporation executive who liquidated everything, everything, so that he could invest himself in habitat for humanity. Or the housewife who closed the closet door one day on the vacuum cleaner and said, today's the day. And she pulled a sheath of papers out from her desk drawer and she began, at last, the novel that had been brewing within her. Or what about the physician who astonished her friends by leaving her successful practice and going to a mission hospital in Africa? The social critic Jonathan Kozol has just published a new book called, "Amazing Grace". It's about the life of children, especially the religious life of

children, in the South Bronx. The poorest congressional district in the nation. One of the people in the South Bronx who most fascinates Kozol is a woman named Martha Overall, they call her "Mother Martha". She's the pastor of an Episcopal church and what intrigues Kozol is, she used to be a Wall Street lawyer and she left a lucrative practice to become the pastor of a shabby little church, in the poorest parish in America. Where do people get the freedom to do that? The venturesomeness to change their lives dramatically and suddenly? One of the most arresting things about the story in Matthew that I just read to us, is that we have four people, Peter and Andrew, James and John, two sets of brothers who themselves dramatically and suddenly changed their lives. Jesus walks along the beach, he simply says to them, follow me. And they do it! They drop their nets, they step out of their boats, they step away from their old lives and they head off on the adventure of a lifetime. How do people do that and why? Well, let's look at the story and see. It may be, you know, that the soil in which this life change happened for these four fishermen was tedium, boredom. I mean, you can imagine being a fisherman in the first century, you mend your net, you cast your net, you pull your net in, you sort the fish, you mend your net, you cast your net, you pull the net in, day after grinding day and the tedium finally wore them down and then there was this voice. With the thrill of adventure in it and a breeze ruffled through their hair, follow me! And they left the tedium behind. In Herb Gardner's play, "A thousand clowns" there is a character named Murray. He is an office clerk but suddenly one day he jerks off his necktie, throws it on the desk and he resigns abruptly. He becomes an open-collared, unemployed, free spirit. His brother Arnold cannot understand this. Arnold is responsible and straight-laced and he accuses Murray of irresponsibility, you're unemployed Murray, how could you do it? Murray tells Arnold, it was the numbness of the tedium. Arnold, about five months ago I forgot what day it was. I was on the subway, going to work and I couldn't remember what day it was, it could have been any day and it scared me Arnold, it scared me. Maybe that's it. Maybe the tedium and the boredom was the soil in which a life change occurred, we understand that. Some long, sleepy afternoons, we look up from what we're doing, we gaze out the window and we daydream, we imagine ourselves somewhere else, doing something else. On a motorcycle, heading toward the west coast, with a breeze ruffling through our hair. Singing in the Metropolitan Opera, starring in a Broadway play, traveling with a rock band, doing something else, anything else. Maybe it was tedium and along came the voice of adventure. Follow me. Or maybe it was that the voice of Jesus touched some unfulfilled place in them, we understand that too. There is something in all of us that awaits flowering. That has not yet blossomed fully. And along came Jesus and said, you're fishermen but you are fishermen in tiny boats on a little sea. I want you to be fishermen on the widest sea of all. I want you to cast your nets into the deep, blue ocean of humanity. I'm going to make you fishers for people. And something unfulfilled was touched in them and they followed. The interesting thing about Matthew though is that if they were bored and if they were unfulfilled, we'll never know about it. Whatever was going on inside them, Matthew refuses to tell us. The tradition is absolutely silent. If they're bored, we're not told, if they were going through a midlife crisis, it's omitted from the tradition. The action in this story, interestingly enough, is not inside them but outside them. What intrigues Matthew is not what is welling up inside of them and spilling out but what is welling up outside of them and reaching in. "The kingdom of heaven", said Jesus, "has come near" and you are called. A friend of mine went to church one Sunday morning. He was a little bit late and so as he slipped into his pew, the choir was singing the introit. He noticed that a neighbor of his was seated next to him on the pew so he nodded a silent greeting. When the service was over though, he leaned over and engaged his neighbor in a conversation. The conversation continued until finally, the whole church was empty except for these two people and a couple of children who were running around,

playing in the sanctuary. One of the children, a little boy, came up into the pulpit, stood there, awestruck, imagining himself to be the preacher, then he noticed his Mother in the vestibule and so he waved his arms and said, into a still live microphone, Mommy, Mommy, look at me, look at me! The neighbor leaned over to my friend and said, I think I've heard that sermon before. (laughing) The interesting thing about Matthew, is he will not allow the disciples to stand up in the boat and say, Jesus, look at me, look at me, I'm bored, I'm unfulfilled, look at me. What is interesting to Matthew is what happens outside of them, toward them. Not inside of them, they are the recipients, the first recipients of an event that happens to all of us, to you and to me. When the kingdom of God comes to you and draws near and beckons to you, calling you. When I was a little boy and would do something that I shouldn't have done, my Mother would sometimes say to me, "Tommy", that's what she called me, "Tommy, that was uncalled for." Now that's an interesting phrase, isn't it? Uncalled for. As if there were something about me, something about being good and human in the world that simply did not well up naturally from inside me but needed to be called for. The good news of this passage is not the news of self expression, or human potential. It is that God will not leave us to our own devices. The kingdom of heaven draws near and beckons to each of us. Come. Back at Princeton, one of my colleagues on the faculty is a new testament scholar by the name of Don Juel. Don Juel is not only committed to the academic study of the bible, he is also committed to the use of the bible in the church, the believing community, so committed that he puts his money where his mouth is and he teaches bible studies to high school students. Junior and senior highs. One afternoon, he was teaching a group of senior highs. He was teaching them about the baptism of Jesus. There was one kid who had been dragged there by his Mother and he was obviously bored and did not want to be there. His body language communicated it, he turned away from the group, he looked distractedly out the window, Don said to himself, I wish he'd pay attention but I'm not gonna waste my time on him, I'll focus on the ones who are listening to me. So he talked about the baptism stories and he said, you know, in the gospel of Mark, it says that when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened and the word is schizo, like schizophrenic. It means that the heavens were ripped apart and we can see the throne room of God. Kids, that's wonderful news because that means we have access to God, we can get to God. When he said that, the distracted and bored kid turned toward the group and said, that ain't what it means. What do you mean? It doesn't mean that we can see God and get to God. What it means, he said, is that God can get to us. The heavens are opened and God is loose in the world and nothing is safe anymore. Don Juel said to himself, I knew immediately he was right. The kingdom of heaven has drawn near and nothing is safe any more. It beckons, come and follow. Heard a wonderful speech recently by James Billington. He's the librarian of Congress and he's an expert on Russia, the old Soviet Union. He talked in the speech about that moment in recent Russian history when there was an attempt by the hardliners to regain the Soviet Union through a coup. Tanks rolled onto Moscow Square, crew-cut crewman were in those tanks, they're pony tailed cousins were manning barricades and it looked like there was going to be tragic violence and bloodshed. But there wasn't. And one of the most astounding forces, said Billington, that averted the violence, one of the most unexpected forces, was old women in the Russian Orthodox Church. People had written them off, nobody in the church anymore but old women. But when those tanks rolled onto Moscow Square, some of those old women rolled out of those churches, climbed up on the tanks, peeked through the little slits at the crew-cut commanders and said, the kingdom of heaven has drawn near, there is another commandment. Thou shalt not kill. And those tanks turned around, with flowers on them and left in peace. The kingdom comes near and beckons to all of us. It may mean that we put our nets down and go to a hospital in Africa. It may mean that we drop the net of

indifference and speak a word of kindness to a neighbor. It may mean that we get out of the boat of uselessness and in our hospital bed or nursing home, pray for the world but the kingdom comes near and beckons. One of the kids, Jonathan Kozol met in the South Bronx was a 12 year old named Anthony. Anthony lives on mean streets. His uncle is addicted to crack cocaine. He's seen several gang murders, he's 12 years old he's seen several murders. One of his best friends is a homeless man named Mr. Mongo who is arrested frequently by the police. This is Anthony's world. But he has another world as well. Mother Martha has told him about the kingdom and he wants to be a writer. His hero is Edgar Allan Poe. He wants to be somebody in the world because the kingdom has drawn near and beckoned him. Kozol said to him one day, you talk a lot about the kingdom of God, what in the world do you mean by that? Wisely, Anthony said, it's very difficult to explain. Kozol said, well why don't you write something about it so I'll understand it. Anthony said, you mean like a homework assignment? Yes said Kozol, it's a homework assignment. You write for me, what is the kingdom of God? A few days later, Anthony showed up with a spiral-bound notebook. On the first page it said, kingdom of God and then he wrote, God will be there. He'll be happy that we've arrived. People will come, hand in hand, it will be bright, not gloomy, like earth. All friendly animals will be there but no mean ones. As for television, forget it. If you want vision you can use your eyes to see people that you love. Nobody will look at you from the outside, people will see you from the inside. All the people from the street will be there. My uncle will be there and he will be healed. You won't see him buying drugs any more because there won't be any money. Mr. Mongo will be there too, you might even see him happy, for a change. The prophets will be there, Adam and Eve and all the disciples and Edgar Allan Poe will be there too. But not like somebody important. He'll be a writer teaching students. There won't be any violence in God's kingdom. There'll be no guns or drugs or IRS, you won't have to pay any taxes. You'll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. Jesus will be good to them and play with them and at night, he'll come and visit your house. God will be fond of you, in the kingdom. That seems a long way away from the streets of the South Bronx, or from you and me. But the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. Very near and you are called, called for. I'd get out of the boat if I were you.