

Which side are you on, oh which side are you on? Which side are you on, oh which side are you on?

This song was written in 1931 by musician and activist Florence Reece, the morning after the local sheriff and his men, who were working for the Harlan County Coal Operators' Association, burst into her home looking for her husband Sam who was an organizer for the national miner's union. This was during the Harlan County War, when coal miners in Kentucky unionized after being reduced to starvation wages.¹

And the empire fought back.

They ransacked Florence's house, terrorized her seven children, and stood outside with guns waiting for her husband Sam to come home. They didn't manage to arrest him that night, but they did inspire Florence to write a song that would become one of the key lyrics of union movements from that time on.

*Come all of you poor workers, good news to you I'll tell
Of how that good old union has come in here to dwell
Which side are you on? Which side are you on?*

It was not a song for the faint of heart, not a song for the wishy washy and not a song for those who did the dirty work of the Harlan County Coal Operators Association. It was a song about making a choice and taking a stand.

It's a good song for today's Gospel from Matthew.

Today as Jesus walks along the shore of the Galilee, it's as though he's singing "Which side are you on, Boys? Which side are you on?..."

He had moved to the area after John the Baptist was arrested. And Jesus picked up John's message: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand."

These were actually fighting words. They helped get John thrown in prison. Because they were spoken in contrast to the kingdom that everybody was already living in – the Kingdom of Caesar, the empire of Rome.

When Jesus called out to the fishermen in the boats, to follow him and start fishing for people who were hungry for alternative to the regime they were living under, he was asking them to take sides.

¹ A History of American Protest Music: Which Side Are You On?

Just as we were in the 1930s and '60s, America is suffering a moral crisis. We have to decide which side we are on: hate and exclusion, or justice, inclusion, and democracy? By Tom Maxwell, [on the website Longreads.](#)

Which side are you on boys, which side are you on?

It was not a call for the faint of heart, not a song for the wishy washy and not a call for those who did the dirty work of Ceasar. It was a call about making a choice and taking a stand.

If you were in a boat fishing on the Galilee, you were fishing for Ceasar. Peter and Andrew and James and John and Zebedee were commercial fisherman. And Rome controlled production, transportation and marking of both the land and the sea with contracts and taxes, according to commentator Warren Carter. *"Jesus disrupts these men's lives, calls them to a different loyalty and way of life, creates a new community, and gives them a new mission (fish for people). His summons exhibits God's empire at work, this light shining in the darkness of Roman-ruled Galilee," writes Carter.*²

What's quite remarkable in this call story from Matthew's Gospel is that the fishermen hear this call, and immediately drop everything – job with the empire, family ties – and follow Jesus. Now maybe we would expect this from Peter because he was always jumping out of boats before anyone could stop him, but in this case the others followed his lead.

Did it actually happen this way? It seems a little farfetched, doesn't it? Unless you consider what it might be like to sit there doing your job and to want something different so much, to want something better, something just and fair, which doesn't serve the Roman Empire. If you longed for God to come down and vanquish the enemy and rule over everything. If you felt like a people lost in darkness and lamented what your nation had become. Then you just might jump at the chance for a change if you heard it, walking along the beach, singing:

Which side are you on Peter? Which side are you on, Andrew? Which side are you on, James, which side are you on, John?

Commentator David Turner writes that in the Bible, God often calls people away from the work they had been doing – threshing, plowing, herding, and now fishing. Matthew himself was called away from tax collecting. "All such stories emphasize that God's call demands a decisive break with business as usual," Turner writes.³

This is the arc of Jesus's public ministry, which is just beginning in today's Gospel. From his Baptism on, Jesus embraces his role to be a light in the darkness. He knows the intense yearning that his people, and really all people who have been conquered by Rome, are feeling for something new. He knows it because God knows it and God is responding to humanity's cry by coming to them as Jesus.

Jesus lives what the Kingdom looks like. He lives like God's law of love as the law of the land. He reverses the illnesses that keep oppressed people weak and malleable – the hunger caused by

² Warren Carter, [Working Preacher Website, 2017 Commentary on Matthew 4:12-23](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-412-23-3).
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-412-23-3>

³ David Turner – Matthew, edition of the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Baker Academic: 2008, page 135.

oppressive policies, the blindness, and lameness and deafness used to subdue slaves and flex military muscle. He lives life over death, and wholeness over illness, and hope over despair. He expects his followers to do the same.

Which side are you on boys, which side are you on?

And he expects us to do the same as well – all these millennia later. Because in every age, every period, the Gospel has insisted on being an alternative to hatred, greed and oppression. The church has not always insisted upon these things – but the Gospel has. It has proclaimed the God of love over the worship of idols. It has called for people to come together in communities that live out what the kingdom looks like. At every turn the Gospel has also asked for our lives – to turn them, to reorient them, to dedicate them and to lay them down for the sake of the Kingdom that's coming.

Today it asks the same of us as our own times force us to consider where our allegiances lie. In a world starving for the Way of Love over the path of hatred, Christ's voice can be heard rocking our own boats, as it calls:

Which side are you on Oh, which side are you on? Which side are you on, oh, which side are you on?