

FIRST LESSON: Jonah 3:1-5
SECOND LESSON: Mark 1:14-20
January 21, 2024

“Called to Follow”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Mark’s gospel is the gospel of “immediately.” Everything happens “immediately.” The other gospels give slightly more context to the call of the first disciples, but only slightly. The things that interest *us*, the backstory as it were, did not interest them. Mark’s emphasis was on the radical nature of Jesus’ call and the instant obedience of those he called.

Now in truth there would, of course, have been a backstory. This would not have been the first time the disciples encountered Jesus. They probably heard him preach by the lake. They had had time to observe him. He in turn had clearly been observing them. He was living in the region and beginning to attract attention because of his words and his other-worldly confidence. As John the Baptist waned in influence following his imprisonment, Jesus’ reputation grew. With John in prison, Jesus became the sole focus of the people.

Jesus preached that the time had come near for the kingdom of God. Since Greek has two words for time and we have one, we should look a little closer at this. The word in Greek is *Kairos* time. *Chronos*, from which we get chronological, is one thing follows another time. But *Kairos* time is special time. It’s the turning point, the time when everything comes together, the decisive moment. *That* time, Jesus said, had come. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.”

Many people in the 1st century were looking for God’s direct intervention in the world. The first disciples would have been among them. They were hoping for a Messiah. They were hoping for deliverance from Roman rule and for independence as a nation. They wanted every injustice and act of oppression to end. When Jesus began to preach that the time was near he would have attracted people looking for both a political and a spiritual solution. The Zealots wanted a military leader with divine power. Jesus was destined to disappoint them. God’s perfect reign was close but not in the form they wanted. The act of divine intervention in the world was the arrival of Jesus himself. Those who listened to Jesus would have wondered if he was the one—the Messiah prophesied about with so many conflicting images. Simon and Andrew, James and John would have been drawn to Jesus. But they would never have taken the audacious step of approaching him.

What is different about this story from the normal order of events, is something we are completely unaware of. For us it seems natural that Jesus should select and call his disciples, but in fact that was a reversal of an established pattern. A rabbi would NOT choose followers. Followers chose the

rabbi. Rabbis acquired disciples when scholars interested in their teaching asked if they could study under them, just as a famous professor today might attract graduate students. Simon and Andrew, James and John knew this. They also knew that the followers of rabbis were scholars, and they would have been very aware of the fact that they did not fit the profile. But not only did Jesus himself issue the call, **he called them**. He called working men. *This just wasn't done!* He called men with little education. He called men who did not have the luxury of sitting at home all day studying the scriptures and parsing out subtle differences of interpretation. The disciples were, to be quite frank, a little rough around the edges. They weren't the highly educated graduate students strolling down the hall in the university, they were the custodians, plumbers and contractors who kept the university functioning. Early Christianity was distinctly blue collar.

Jesus and the first disciples were also northerners from the region of Galilee. It is easy to miss the point of this too. The north was not the same as the south. Samaria was stuck between the two so there was no smooth transition point. The south was where Jerusalem was. The south was sophisticated and worldly. Northerners were looked down upon. The American north-south dynamic doesn't parallel well to this, but the British north-south relationship does. London is in the south. The elite and the ruling classes are in the south. What's in the north? All those barbaric Scots. When Margaret Thatcher was in power and any painful cuts needed to be made she always did it to Scotland, because she didn't need a single Scottish vote to stay in power. Just imagine Jesus in a kilt with a bunch of Scottish fishermen throwing tables over in Westminster Abbey and you get the picture.

And now, back to those fishermen. They were working, just like every other day except for the sabbath. The Sea of Galilee was a busy and profitable fishing region, and the fishermen varied from large businesses to individuals with one boat. Much of the fish was then salted to preserve it and sent south. The first pair we meet are Simon and Andrew, brothers who were casting a net into the lake. Net fishing worked well, and two working together could cast a heavy net far and then pull it together. Jesus approached and said, "Come follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people." Mark tells us "At once they left their nets and followed him." Really? Abandon all that valuable equipment when you have a family to feed? Peter was married. It's not hard to guess what his wife would have to say about that. My guess is that it was more like they shouted out to friends to take over and pack everything up safely before leaving for the day. Jesus didn't say they were going away. They went to follow him, to see what he had to say. And on the way they met more fishermen. Another set of brothers, James and John were preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and once again "immediately", or as the NIV puts it, "without delay" they left everything and followed him. In this case they left their father with the hired men.

Whether we intended to do this or not, much of our outreach has followed the traditional model of Jesus' time. We assume that people will take a look at Jesus and decide to follow him. We follow the famous professor with graduate students format. We present Jesus and faith as an option to consider,

not a relationship. We treat people like consumers of a product. But Jesus is not a menu option. God wants to be at the center of our lives, not an alternative on the periphery. If we are being true to our reformed faith, it is really the other way around. We don't choose God. God calls us. I am not the center of my faith. Jesus is. He's the one who has called me. To follow Jesus is to say "yes" to his call. And saying yes to Jesus is saying yes to service. It is to become part of the body of Christ in the world. I am no longer the one calling the shots. Jesus is.

Jesus called these men to follow him. He must have been watching them. Observation goes both ways. As he taught, he scrutinized the behavior of the men in the community of fishermen. He knew which ones were spiritually hungry, and which ones were just there to be entertained. He knew what they were made of by the way they treated one another. When Jesus chose his followers he did so after much thought and prayer. But he didn't call perfect people. And when Jesus called these four fishermen from the lives that they knew, they had no idea what was ahead. These were real flesh and blood people with real relationships. For a long time, Jesus' ministry was in the northern regions, so they were never too far from home. But geography can be deceiving. They may not have been physically far from home, but in terms of how they lived the change was dramatic. And they never knew what Jesus was going to do next! They never knew where they were going to go and what they were going to learn. When Peter stepped out of the boat into the water to come to Jesus that was a very concrete example of what daily life had been all about.

Our sisters and brothers from Overbrook Presbyterian have also just stepped way out of their comfort zone. At Overbrook there will now always be a "before the fire" and an "after the fire." Everything familiar has been ripped away. While we know this trauma, when we had our flood the building was closed due to Covid. The school had a harder time than the congregation because they had to find an alternative location. When we returned to worship here all of the hard work had been done. Heather knew best what the building looked like at its worst because she worked closely with the contractors. I knew and the elders knew because we came and saw it, but much of the congregation did not. We returned to worship after the walls and floors had been replaced. It will not be that way for Overbrook. And as they are exploring this new unsettling reality of exodus, we are moving into our new call of hospitality. God calls us. Scripture tells us what to do. We welcome our sisters and brothers and we share what we have, and in so doing all will be blessed. Discipleship is a step into the unknown, trusting God to lead us in the right direction. We may not know what is ahead, and Overbrook doesn't, but God does, and God calls us to live by faith and trust in God's plan, as individuals, and as a community. Amen.

Jonah 3:1-5

3 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time:² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.