

Follow Me — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Mark 1:14-20

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 01-24-2021

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

This year we will be visiting the Gospel of Mark for our New Testament reading most Sundays. I will periodically throw in some helpful things to note as we are reading through Mark.

One of the hallmarks of Mark’s Gospel, is the speed at which things appear to happen. First this, then this and this and so on. Things may not have happened as rapidly as they are presented, but rather this is a way for Mark to emphasize the

urgency with which Jesus proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God. We will see this in today's text.

As a reminder, last week we examined the lives of young Samuel in the Old Testament and Philip and Nathaniel in the Gospel of John in the New Testament and the responses of these men to God's call. Today we are going to consider what it means to hear God, to hear Jesus call out to us, "Follow Me."

As an exercise to help you put yourself in the text, I want you to pick a person from the Scripture I just read, other than Jesus, and I want you to imagine this scene from their perspective. You could even pick an unnamed by-stander if you wanted to consider this scene from their view. I would like you to keep that person in mind throughout this sermon.

Let's set the stage.

Prior to verse 14, we are told that Jesus is baptized by John the Baptizer in the wilderness by the Jordan River and then Jesus is tempted, further out into the wilderness, by Satan. With verse 14, we shift from the wilderness to Galilee.

We are first told that John has been arrested and handed over (to King Herod we will learn later in Mark). Then we are told that Jesus "came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"

If you were reading Mark's Gospel like a novel, you might see John's arrest as foreshadowing Jesus' arrest and crucifixion – as they both came proclaiming a message of repentance that was rejected by those in charge. It is also a foreshadowing of the outcomes for many of those who followed Jesus.

There is risk that comes with proclaiming the Good News of God's Kingdom. Not everyone wants to hear about it.

After we are told that Jesus has come proclaiming the good news of God, we are told in verses 16-20, that,

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

What an odd thing to say.

Granted Jesus was talking to fishermen, but still – fish for people?

What did the four who left everything to follow Jesus think he meant by that? What would the people around the boats that day have thought?

When we think of fishing, we think of people on a riverbank or lakeside casting their fishing lines with hooks and baits on the end.

That is not what fishing looked like for people at the Sea of Galilee. Casting of nets in biblical times involved a net 5 to 7 feet in diameter with weights on one side. The nets would be tossed out from the boat, the weights would pull one side down and a rope in the middle would be pulled to bring in fish. This was hard work.

It was not just the actual casting of the nets that was hard, the fish that were caught had to be hauled into the boat and hauled onto shore. The nets themselves appeared to constantly need repairing. That is what it seems that the four, soon-to-be disciples were doing with the others at the boats. Hard work.

Being called to be fishers of people is just as hard. Those four that Jesus called, and other disciples, would spend the rest of their time with Jesus learning and being molded to be fishers of people.

Follow Me.

That sounds like such a simple thing.

It wasn't. It isn't.

Do you think the four disciples had any idea what was in store for them when they immediately responded to Jesus' call "Follow me"?

For the four disciples that day, following Jesus meant leaving behind everything that was known and comfortable for the unknown and uncomfortable. They would spend three years having their lives transformed by Jesus so that they could be used by God to help transform the world.

I asked you to think about this text from the perspective on one of the people named or even unnamed. How does viewing the call from Jesus to "Follow Me" change depending on who witnessed or heard that call?

For the four disciples, there was something compelling about Jesus and his call to them. Like Philip and Nathaniel last week, we don't know if these four fishermen had ever heard of Jesus before, or if they knew he as a teacher and a miracle-worker. All we know is that Jesus approached, said "Follow Me" and they did.

The text doesn't tell us if the brothers, Simon and Andrew, were working with other family members, if they owned their boat or were working for someone else. Just that they immediately left their nets and followed Jesus.

As for Zebedee's sons, James and John, we know that they were working with their father and other hired hands, but they too just immediately left their nets *and* their father, and followed Jesus.

And what about the others around the boats that day who did not hear Jesus call them to Follow? Did they feel left out? Were they relieved? Was Zebedee happy or angry at his sons. We know from other texts that Simon was married (he had a mother-in-law). What would his wife and mother-in-law have to say about this?

We do not know the answers to those questions. We can speculate as to what some thought or felt as we put ourselves into their shoes.

Follow Me.

Answering the call of God is not easy.

Sometimes it means changing vocations and locations. Sometimes it means walking away from family and societal expectations. It may mean that you will struggle with all of that.

Answering the call of God is not easy.

Sometimes it means staying right where you are and serving God in the job you are already doing. Sometimes it means confronting family and societal expectations. There is struggle there, too!

Follow me, Jesus says.

Follow Jesus, where?

Think for a moment about the message of Jesus as proclaimed in Mark 1:14-15.

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Both John the Baptizer and Jesus preached a message of repentance. John’s message was “repent for the Messiah’s coming is near.” Jesus’ message was repent because “the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near.”

Jesus’ message may sound odd. The time is fulfilled – and the Kingdom of God is near.

I have said this phrase a few times in my preaching: “The now, and the not yet.” This is another example of that. The Kingdom of God, the Reign of God was ushered in with the coming of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God, the Reign of God, however, is not yet fully complete.

This is why Jesus called his disciples when he was preaching and teaching to “follow him.” This is why Jesus calls his disciples, us - today, to “follow him.”

The Reign of God which Jesus ushered in has not been completed. God still calls us to work along side and to follow Jesus.

Quoting Pastor Roger Gench, of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in D.C.,

Whatever the future is, or will be, can be known and it can be realized by what is going on right now. That means we must engage the present moment with as much honesty, creativity, boldness, and yes, mindfulness, as we can. ... Why? Because the 'now' is not just the now. It is ... pregnant with the future. ... It already contains the future." On the Third Sunday after Epiphany we are summoned to believe in this good news, and to follow the one whose life, ministry, death and resurrection blazes our way into it, even now.ⁱⁱ

Whatever is happening in our world or in our lives, God still calls us to believe in this good news, and to follow the one whose life, ministry, death and resurrection blazes our way into the present and the future.

When we hear the call from Jesus to "Follow Me," we do not know where that call might take us or ask of us.

May we, like the first disciples, hear that call and immediately leave the things that might be hard work (like casting nets for fish) and pick up the hard work (fishing for people) and follow Jesus.

Follow Jesus.

Please pray with me.

You call us,
Wanderer of seashores and sidewalks,
inviting us to sail out of our smug harbors
into the uncharted waters of faith
to wander off from our predictable paths to follow You
into the unpredictable footsteps of the kingdom;
to leave the comfort of our homes and accompany
You into the uncomfortable neighborhoods we usually
avoid.

As we wait,
in our simple, sometimes crazy,
constantly uncertain lives,
speak to us, Spirit of Grace:
of that hope which is our anchor;
of that peace which is our rock;
of that grace which is our refuge.ⁱⁱⁱ

Amen.

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ <https://pres-outlook.org/2021/01/3rd-sunday-after-epiphany-january-24-2021/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/search/label/Epiphany%203%20B>.