

Calling Disciples

Mark 1:14-20

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.

Last time we talked about Jesus calling two disciples: Philip and Nathanael. Philip had been waiting for the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote. Philip was not bothered that Jesus was the son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael, on the other hand, was looking for someone from Judah, who would come as Rabbi, teacher, Son of God and King of Israel. In today's scripture we just heard of two sets of brothers who are called to be disciples. However, they were called in different ways from Philip and Nathanael. I fear, just as I was taught how disciples were called and nurtured in my small home congregation, there is no real, one size fits all; no formula we can follow and soon have a congregation filled to overflowing with disciples, learner, and followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus can and does use different methods of making disciples.

Mark's brief account of the beginnings of Jesus' Galilean ministry links Jesus' proclamation of the gospel with his calling of a band of disciples. These activities are by no means unrelated. Jesus' proclamation is not just a solo recitation of informative words but is an action that creates community and is taken up and continued by that community. In these few verses Jesus gives a model, but not the

only model for the doctrines of the church and its proclamation, the Christian life, and even the person and work of Christ.

Jesus' message, aptly characterized as "good news," is a declaration of God's victory, an announcement of a wondrously new state of affairs breaking into the present. Mark's Gospel will proceed to illustrate how liberation, restoration, and reconciliation are already happening in Jesus' healing miracles, his casting out of demons, and his teaching. The trajectory initiated by Jesus' proclamation and ministry is promised to eventuate in the final consummation of God's purposes for humanity when the Son of Man returns in glory.

Jesus taught repent and believe in the good news. Ever since Luther stressed the priority of grace and faith over human works, interpreters have drawn attention to the precedence of the indicative to the imperative in this text. The imperative to repent and believe, turning away from prior trusts and loyalties, is a response to the indicative claim that the kingdom is at hand, that God is graciously at work.

The story of the calling of the disciples follows Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom in order to demonstrate what this kingdom involves. Right away Jesus not only talks about the reign of God but enacts it. The ultimate religious authority that he would later exercise over winds, waves, and demons is immediately evident in his calling of the disciples. In Mark's Gospel Jesus is the sole catalyst of the action. He calls the disciples compellingly. The only words reported are Jesus' words; the disciples say nothing. Drawn only by his summons, they follow Jesus before he has performed any spectacular miracles that could serve as validating credentials. As Karl Barth has noted, they are elected to discipleship simply through the fact that Jesus claims them. When Jesus declares that now they shall be fishers of people, their new status is anchored in the fact that Jesus has fished for them; Jesus is the ultimate fisher, and they are the netted fish. In the obedient responses of the two sets of brothers the reign of God is actualized in the present.

For theologians through the centuries this connection of message and call has had critical consequences. Jesus' own action is the inbreaking of the proclaimed

kingdom, the fulfillment of the promise. As Rudolf Bultmann noted, wherever Jesus was active, the time was fulfilled and the kingdom was present. Whenever the gospel is preached, the reign of God draws near to the hearers, calling for a decision. But Bultmann may have underestimated the equally important future orientation of Jesus' proclamation. Although the kingdom is inbreaking in the present, it remains hidden; the full manifestation of the newly inaugurated era awaits the future. Theologians have described this new era variously, elaborating it according to the hopes of their specific cultures and personalities. For some it has been seen as a new situation of unconditional acceptance of sinful humanity. For others it has been seen as a time of unprecedented spiritual vitality displacing an era of stagnation. For yet others it has been seen as a new age of peace and justice healing the old order of oppression and hostility. But however the reign of God has been envisioned, it consistently involves God's satisfaction of the deepest human yearnings and the accomplishment of God's purposes. And Jesus is more than a model teacher, spiritual guide, or activist; Jesus is the presence of the transformative power of God. **Lee Barrett**

Jesus begins his public ministry proclaiming that "the time is fulfilled." "Fulfilled" would seem to suggest that something is accomplished, finished, brought to completion. And yet the gospel story is just beginning. Here we have a case of instant decisions for Christ: Simon, Andrew, James, and John drop everything and become disciples, just like that, "immediately." But, again, this is not the end of the story. This is just the beginning of "the beginning" (v. 1). Ahead, for them and for us, there is much to learn, much stumbling, misunderstanding, taking one step forward and two steps back. Becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.

In Mark's Gospel we see how this early decision needs to be reaffirmed and even corrected time and again. At Caesarea Philippi, Simon affirms his faith in Jesus, but not his faith in Jesus as the suffering Messiah—that will take a lifetime (8:27-33). On the mount of transfiguration Peter knows how good it is to be with

Jesus but forgets that the real task is to follow Jesus—for a lifetime (9:2-8). In the courtyard, warming himself before the fire, Peter threatens to give up a lifetime of fidelity for a moment of fear (14:66-72). When Jesus is on the cross, Peter, Andrew, and James are nowhere to be found; only John is found at the foot of the cross. Even then God does not count that moment as the final word: now Jesus will go before them—for a lifetime (15:40-41; 16:7-8).

Some of us so stress the moment of decision for Jesus that we fail to nurture the long-standing commitment. Decision is to be lived out in fidelity, service, even sacrifice. Others of us are so good at nurturing that we forget that even "cradle Christians" sometimes need to decide for fidelity, service, even sacrifice. Christianity is always both for now and for the long haul; both a moment and a lifetime.

Still, stories like these instant conversions give legitimacy to spontaneity, acting on impulse, trusting in the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We remember and prize those rare moments when, in the midst of life's prevalent ambiguities, choices suddenly became clear.

James and John "immediately" left Zebedee, which probably pained him. But did they dishonor their father? I would like to think not. I would like to think that this parent taught his children to strike out onto the unpredictable seas—and so he could not fault them for going their own way.

In a movie Billy Elliot tells the story of a young boy growing up in a working-class neighborhood in northern England. Quite unexpectedly (quite suddenly almost) he discovers that he loves classical dance and that he dances well. Then, over the long weeks and years, his father has to learn to entrust his son to a world he can barely understand. But at the end of the movie we watch the old man come to London to watch Billy Elliot leap and turn and dance with beauty and with joy. And in the old man's face: sheer pride and true joy.

In our own lives we have taught our children to follow the Spirit's leadings. We must allow our children to make their own decisions, even if they are not the ones

we would make. We can take pride in their choices and feel honored that they learned at home to follow their heart. We should affirm the Holy Spirit's freedom to call our children in directions we didn't expect.

In northern Minnesota, the opening day of fishing season is practically a holy day, similar to that of deer hunting season in Michigan. Sermons on fishing texts, therefore, are well received. The problem is that our kind of fishing—using lures or live bait—is predicated on trickery. But the biblical casting of nets is different—straightforward, totally encompassing, without artifice. Yes, evangelism aims to take human fish where they did not plan to go, but we should seek to convert without resorting to "bait and switch."

In Jesus' day fishing involves more than the act of casting nets and pulling in the haul! There are also the preparations, the mending of nets, repairing the tools that are bound to be damaged and worn in the rough-and-tumble between the hunter and the hunted and the ever-changing environment in which the drama is played out. You can't always be fishing, even if that's your favorite part.

This passage begins with an ominous note: John was arrested. Mark's audience needed no further elaboration—they knew the story, they knew the risks involved with giving yourself over to a new vision that challenges the status quo. To repent, to begin a new life, to be led by the Spirit, takes not just faith but also courage.

Elton W. Brown

John Calvin helped popularize this passage as a paradigm of the calling of all Christians. We the readers, in whatever culture or century, are they. According to Calvin, God called "rough people" like Simon, Andrew, James, and John in order to show that none of are called by virtue of his or her own talents or excellences. Like those disciples who misunderstood and failed Jesus at every turn, we too are sinners in need of forgiveness for our multiple betrayals. Like them, we sinners, despite our failings, are slowly being transmuted into followers of Christ. Like them we are called not to the enjoyment of a private salvation but to a public vocation. Like them, and like Abraham, we are summoned by God to leave our

parents' house, abandoning self-interest, security, and social approbation. Like them, we can find our inadequate attempts at ministry transformed by grace into extensions of Jesus' proclamatory activity. Just as it did for the disciples, the command "Follow me" points to the way of the cross for us. Just as it did for the disciples, the ominous reference to the arrest of John the Baptist warns that we too are called to a life of risk, insecurity, and self-abnegation. **Lee Barrett**

I want to remind us that Jesus can and does call all to be disciples. My brother Jerry remind of a member of our congregation when we were children. His name was J B Caldwell. He had cognitive challenges, maybe all his life, but surely as long as we knew him. By the time I was a teenager his parents and older brother had died, and he was living with his sister-in-law and her new husband. He was also blind, probably from diabetes. However, with all his challenges, he understood he was a disciple of Christ. And part of what he enjoyed and his service to the church was leading the congregation in a song with his harmonica. I know of others who enjoyed helping clean the church as part of their service to God and church. Others do gardening and share nature in other ways. We even collect empty egg cartons for a local school where Murietta volunteers. You see, all of us are called to a lifetime of learning and service when we say yes to God invitation.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Westminster John Knox Press. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]