

# Answering Jesus' Call: "Follow Me"

Mark 1:14-20    Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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This morning we're going to explore the issue of what it means in your life and mine, and in the life of this congregation, to answer Jesus' call to follow him. As a way to get into this topic, let's take a look at this morning's Gospel reading from the first chapter in Mark. With an exceptional economy of words, by the time we get to only the 14<sup>th</sup> verse of this gospel, Mark has already introduced us to John the Baptist, told of Jesus' baptism and his time of temptation in the wilderness, that John has been arrested. So now he moves to the inauguration of Jesus' ministry.

Mark places the narrative in the area of Galilee, declaring that Jesus came "proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" There are lots of sermons in just those two verses alone, such as addressing the topics:

- What is the good news of God?
- What does it mean that the time is fulfilled?
- What is the kingdom of God anyway, and what does it mean that it has come near?
- What does it mean to repent?
- And what exactly does believing in the good news entail?

Most likely, these verses simply act as a summary statement, of sorts, of what Mark plans to explore in detail later in his gospel. And since the assigned lectionary gospel readings will deal primarily with the Gospel of Mark throughout this entire year, we too will wait until these issues are fleshed out at a later time.

Mark moves quickly, then, to his story of Jesus calling his first disciples. We're told that as Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw a man named Simon (who will be renamed Peter) and his brother Andrew. Both were working together to cast a net into the sea. I get a big kick out of Mark adding, "for they were fishermen," like his readers needed an explanation of why two grown men are throwing a net into the sea.

Jesus simply tells them, "**Follow me and I will make you fish for people.**" Without any explanation of why, Mark tells us that they "immediately left their nets and followed" Jesus. The same thing happens with Jesus' call to brothers James and John. They were fishing in a boat with their father and the hired hands, obviously making this the family business and livelihood.

While the act of immediately leaving their profession seems odd, on a literal level, the gospel writer is simply following the common literary pattern known as a "**call story**," dozens of which occur throughout the Old and New Testaments. A primary characteristic of most call stories is to **explain the abruptness and total commitment**

**demonstrated by those being called by God.** In the case of Simon and Andrew, they gave up their profession in order to follow Jesus. James and John gave up more than that, for they also violated the patriarchal system of their day by not asking the permission of their father, but simply left him sitting in the boat.

So rather than attaching too literal of an interpretation to these call stories, their primary purpose was to indicate that **answering the call of God to discipleship always comes with a cost.** We, like they, are therefore being informed that we must be willing to give up something in order to bring the good news of God to others. That shouldn't really surprise us, however, because there is no ministry effort that doesn't bear a cost, whether it be in the form of the sharing of our time, our talents, and yes, often our financial resources. And sometimes it involves moving out beyond our own protective comfort zone.

A major point of the story of Jesus' calling of the first disciples is to indicate the **response** of those being called by God. The four fishermen, without any explanation of what Jesus was actually calling them to do, responded by dropping everything and immediately followed Jesus by joining him in his ministry.

Yet, the Bible has some examples of other types of responses of those being called by God. For example, **Moses'** first response was to say that he had a speech impediment and that God should send somebody else. **Jonah's** first response was to get into a boat and hightail it in the exact opposite direction of where God wanted him to go. So God, as we heard in this morning's Old Testament reading, had to call Jonah a second time.

**So here's what we are faced with. If you and I are also called by God in one fashion or another to a particular ministry of one type or another, which I believe we are by virtue of our baptism, then it makes sense that we should also pay careful attention to how we respond.** Even if we begin by giving some kind of justification of why God must have gotten the wrong person or congregation, do we usually end up responding by following the call or not? Let me state at this point that this congregation, for 103 years now, has a very long history of answering the call to discipleship.

Concerning the actual call to discipleship itself, **how do we "hear," experience, or discern that call in the first place? That, I believe, involves your understanding of God.** Trying to precisely describe just how God calls us varies, I believe, from person to person. I've always contended that **God speaks to each individual's heart, mind and spirit in the way and manner that that person can hear and understand.** So again, that most likely depends upon your own theological understanding of God. That's why I go back to that question all the time. Not only that, how you hear and discern God's call may even change throughout your own journey of faith. It certainly has in mine.

I believe there are a few things, however, that might help us to hear, to discern God's call to follow. **As far as your ministry efforts in your personal life and within the life of this congregation is concerned, I would suggest that God is calling you to the particular service that excites you the most; the type of ministry you feel most passionate about; the projects or organizations that energize you, not drain you.** That is an exercise that I suggest each year at our annual Session Retreat, like the one we held just two weeks ago, when each of the ruling elders sought to discern what ministry team to serve on during the coming year. I would suggest the same exercise to each of you.

**Part of my role as the pastor of this congregation is to help you discern where God may be calling you to serve. But I am not a mind-reader.** So if you need some help discerning your call, please give me a call and I'd be more than pleased to visit with

you about it – it's that important, both to you and to the life and ministry of this congregation.

Going back briefly to Mark's gospel story, the initial call to those four fishermen was quite focused. Upon hearing Jesus' call to follow him, they started a new kind of fishing – fishing for people. If an element of our own calling involves a similar directive, then what exactly does that mean? I agree with most biblical interpreters that **consider the phrase “fish for people” as a way to invite other people into a way of life that lives out and furthers the kingdom or realm of God in our midst.**

The term that perhaps best describes this element of discipleship is **evangelism**. While this term has fallen out of favor with most Presbyterians, it is one that we have been trying hard to reclaim. That's because evangelism itself doesn't have anything to do with any particular theological perspective, like evangelicalism. Rather, it is simply putting a focus on sharing the good news with others, and inviting them to join us along the journey within the context of this particular community of faith.

A crucial question, therefore, that should always be at the forefront of any congregation, including ours, is this: **What difference would it make if this particular church didn't exist?** What difference would it make in your own life personally? What difference would it make within this neighborhood of Kendall Whittier, within the larger community of Tulsa, within Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, even within the entire Presbyterian denomination? While there may be different answers to this question, **your particular answer is an important piece of that good news that you can share with others.**

**Reach out to others with the good news of God's inclusive love and grace, and our dedication to issues such as progressive theological thought, peace and justice, inclusivity, and providing a safe place where folks can explore and question their own journey of faith. Let this be a priority for us all during this coming year.**

And remember the simplicity and clarity of Jesus' call. “Follow me.” For us, and especially for those who associate themselves with progressive Christianity, **these two words, “follow me,” have way more to do with living a way of life in the manner to which Jesus taught than it does to giving intellectual assent to a particular set of theological doctrines.**

So as always, how you and I respond to that call to follow Jesus is up to each one of us, individually and as a congregation.

Amen.