

*Third Sunday after Epiphany*

January 21, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 1: 14-20)

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, 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."

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. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So let's say you're at your desk the first thing in the morning. Your first cup of coffee is still warm, and you haven't quite gotten to those voicemails with the flashing light on your phone. And so you look up, and there is a guy standing there that you have never seen before. Just as you wonder, "Where did he come from?" he says, "Follow me." What would you do?

You're at your locker. It's three minutes until the late bell. You're trying to decide if you really want to carry that math book to class, because it's so heavy. And you look up, and there's a guy standing there that you have never seen before. And just as you wonder, "How'd he get in here?" he says, "Follow me." Would you follow him?

You are in the grocery store, standing by the frozen peas. You're trying to decide whether to get the big bag because it's on sale, or the little bag, because that's really all the peas you really need. And you look over, and there's a guy standing there that you have never seen before. And just as you wonder, "Does he need to get to the peas?" he says, "Follow me." Would you leave your shopping cart and follow?

Would you follow this guy, who does not identify himself, shows no sign of authority, speaks of no desperate need or crisis. He just says, "Follow me." Who would you drop everything and follow this guy? It's kind of creepy. It is kind of weird.

*"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. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him."*

Seriously? Who would do this? Don't these guys have families to support, and bills to pay, and garages to clean? *"Follow me and I will make you fish for people."* Who fishes for people? The visual image there is just odd. Where does it come from?

There is only one other reference to "fishing for people" in the Bible, and that's in Jeremiah 16:16. But it comes when God is having a fit. He is furious. God is saying, *"I'm coming after you."*

*"I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. For my eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from my presence, nor is their iniquity concealed from my sight. And I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sins."*

See what I mean? God is angry. And it's the only reference to fishing for people in the Old Testament. Which doesn't really make sense here when Jesus says it. Would you drop everything and follow someone who says this? Can you imagine any circumstance in that era, or this one, where you drop your whole life, your family, your friends, and immediately follow somebody you never met before who wants you to fish for people? I don't buy it.

It has been said that Mark's is a "low context" story. Which is to say, Mark's Gospel assumes we know about all this stuff, and so he doesn't have to put in a lot of details. For example, in our day, we talk about 9-11, without filling out the rest of the date. Or we talk about Charlottesville, or Las Vegas, assuming people know what we're talking about. Katrina, or Harvey. We don't throw in the details.

Have you ever been visiting with a family and they start telling family stories? "You know, you remember the time when Uncle George did that thing and it was so funny." And you're sitting there, going, "I have no idea what they're talking about."

That's what Mark is doing. He's assuming people already know all the details to this story. And he's not wasting paper writing them down.

Except now it's two thousand years later, and it's a little bit tougher to understand this story. There's probably way more to the calling of the disciples. But Mark didn't feel like he needed to fill it in. So here we are in 2018, not knowing the back-story, and all we hear is, "Jesus came. He said, 'Follow me,' and immediately they followed."

*"Immediately they followed."* And we all think, "I could never do that. They were really special. They were heroes! They were strong! They had such faith! I could never drop my net, or my stethoscope, or my hammer, or my laptop, and follow Jesus. I'm not good enough, or strong enough, or faithful enough." Right? Don't we wonder if we should just give it all up and follow, and then feel like we're not good enough when we don't? I have felt that way.

We get stuck on the "leaving their nets and immediately following him" part, which gives us a good chunk of Lutheran guilt, but not much else. And maybe leaving immediately is not the point here.

Maybe the point is not what the fishermen did. The point is not the ability of these fishermen to dive in whole or give everything up. It's not about their decision or sacrifice. This story is not about the power of the fishermen.

The story is about the power of God. The power of God to create something that wasn't there before. To take a bunch of fishermen and create a movement that would change the world. It's not about us. It's about God.

When we focus on the disciples – how hard it would be to give up the life they had, how brave they must have been, how much they achieved and sacrificed – we take ourselves out of the equation: "I can never do that. That was for them, back then."

But what if we focus on the power of God to use us, even us, in the kingdom of God? Not like they did, but like I can and must follow. What if we let God use us, with all of our talents and all of our humanness, what if we let God use us to reveal the Kingdom of God? What if God is doing something new today with us? What if there is something new for us to do? What if Jesus wants us to do something today?

When Jesus says, *"Follow me,"* it's not the only time he asks someone to do something. To the disciples, he says, *"Follow me."* To the paralyzed man, he says, *"Pick up your mat and go home."* To the dead man, he says, *"Get up."* To the wind, he says, *"Be still."* Those other things we call miracles – mighty acts of God.

Is it any less a miracle for God to ask the disciples to follow him? Is it any less a miracle that God takes a random bunch of people off a fishing boat and turns them into disciples? Is it any less a miracle that God takes you and I and sends us to bring good news to St. Paul, Minnesota?

Think about it. "*Follow me*" could mean leave everything behind and travel all over Palestine as an itinerant preacher. But it could also mean going next door to bring soup to a neighbor who is in the middle of cancer treatments, and who is alone and scared, and really needs someone to sit with them and watch a movie, and help them remember how to laugh. Maybe that's the miracle God will do through you today.

Or maybe "*follow me*" could mean taking one of those small but scary steps into understanding and acting against white supremacy, or homophobia, or misogyny, or any of the painful, destructive forces around us. Maybe that's the miracle God will do through you today.

Maybe "*follow me*" could mean doing less, and praying more, so when you do go out to work in God's kingdom, it will be with more clarity and more peace. Maybe that is God's miracle today.

God chooses the miracles. God chooses the opportunities. In Mark's Gospel, it was the chance for four guys to immediately leave their nets and go with Jesus. Today, who knows who may appear? Who knows what opportunities may open up? Who knows how we will hear, "*Follow me*"?

May God give us the insight and the courage to follow.

Amen.