

Follow Me

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 14, 2018
based on John 1:35-46; Luke 5:1-11; Mark 1:16-20***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series, which began last week, entitled, "Journey to Jerusalem." Last week we considered how at the beginning of the story of Jesus, in the birth stories, there is a recurring theme that people are called to set out on a journey of faith—Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men all journey to Bethlehem. The journey continues. Mary and Joseph soon journeyed on to Egypt, in order to escape from King Herod. In Egypt, there is a whole set of traditional sites where Mary and Joseph and the Christ child are believed to have stayed for a time, before they finally journeyed back to Nazareth.

With that kind of beginning, it is no surprise that Jesus' adult ministry would likewise be characterized by a journey. We will be tracking that journey in this sermon series, looking today at the start of Jesus' public ministry as he called his disciples. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The gospel of Mark, known for its succinct storytelling, relates the account of Jesus' calling four of his disciples in just five verses, saying that "As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea . . . 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." (Mark 1:16-20)

If this were the whole story, you would likely conclude that these fishermen were the most impulsive people imaginable. It appears that here they are, in the midst of a day of fishing, when Jesus shows up, says, "Follow me," and immediately, they just ditch everything to follow this guy who knows where.

But of course there is more to the story. We heard some of the background to the story in the gospel of John. In contrast to the condensed style of Mark, John relates the stories of Jesus in all their complexities. We heard how Andrew at one time had been associated with John the Baptist. Through John the Baptist, Andrew one day met Jesus. He went and got his brother, Simon, and the two of them spent some time talking with Jesus. The gospel of John indicates that both of them were quite impressed with Jesus, they sensed that God was powerfully at work in him, and they even had the notion that perhaps Jesus was the Messiah. They did not follow Jesus right then, however, for John reports that Jesus went on and called Philip, who then also brought Nathanael to Jesus. Simon and Andrew returned to their fishing, where undoubtedly they shared their experience with James and John, two fellow fishermen who, we know from the gospel of

Luke, were partners in fishing with them. [*James and John were partners with Simon. Luke 5:10*]

We get still more of the story from the gospel of Luke, from the passage we also heard this morning. It is the full account of that condensed version that we heard from Mark. Luke tells how Jesus encounters the brothers Simon and Andrew, and the brothers James and John—the four fishermen—on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, also called Lake Gennesaret in our passage. He persuades Simon to put out from shore and cast his net again—even though Simon had previously been able to catch nothing—and they get an enormous catch of fish, giving a striking context for Jesus’ statement, “From now on you will be catching people.” (Luke 5:10) The story concludes just as it does in Mark: “They left everything and followed him.” (Luke 5:11)

So these fishermen were not rash or impulsive in their decision to follow Jesus. They had had multiple contacts with Jesus, they had had time for reflection, and they had seen Jesus’ power—there is previous story in Luke about how Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law of an illness, and then there is this miraculous catch of fish. And it is not as though these fishermen were simply busy with their fishing when Jesus called them, otherwise oblivious to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus’ call to them actually happened in the midst of a sermon. The story in Luke begins with the statement that “the crowd was pressing in on Jesus to hear the word of God” (Luke 5:1). Jesus was preaching to the crowd, at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The four fishermen were there, at their beached boats, listening to Jesus while working on their nets. The crowd was pressing in so much, we are told, that “Jesus asked Simon to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.” (Luke 5:3) So Simon’s boat became the pulpit. The catch of fish happened right after that, and then Jesus called Simon and the others to follow as disciples. You never know what might happen during a sermon.

All this illustrates why you need to read the whole Bible and not just pieces, because only then do you get the full story. The full story tells us a great deal about how God reaches to us and speaks to us.

It shows us, for example, how *God will speak through other people around us*. Notice all the interpersonal connections in this story. It starts with Andrew becoming aware of Jesus, then Andrew brings Simon to hear Jesus, then the two of them talk to James and John. The same pattern happens when Jesus goes on and calls Philip, who then goes and talks to Nathanael. God communicates to us through other people, and certainly there are times when we are called to be the person who talks to someone else about Jesus, to say, as Philip said to Nathanael, “Come and see” (John 1:46)

The story of the disciples also shows us how *God gives us signs of God’s presence and power*. The fishermen got a clear sign in the great catch of fish. On the other hand, signs are only clear to those who have eyes of faith to see. When Jesus instructed Simon to cast the net into waters that had previously yielded nothing, and suddenly the net was so full of

fish that they could barely pull it in, the fishermen could have said of Jesus, “Wow, this guy really knows how to fish,” or “This is our lucky day!” Instead, they recognized the hand of God in it all. Today God gives us many signs of God’s presence and power; we need to open the eyes of faith to perceive how God is near and speaking to us.

Finally, the story shows plainly how *God speaks when the community gathers to hear God’s Word*. This is a principle that may seem obvious but which is much underappreciated in our time, when many people imagine that they don’t need worship or any occasion of hearing God’s Word; they can just be vaguely spiritual by themselves. But for the fishermen, the decisive moment happened when they were with a group of people hearing Jesus proclaim the word of God. This is why we connect with the church today, so that we can hear God afresh.

But our story not only illustrates how God speaks; it shows us the essence of *what God says*. This is especially clear in the message that Simon receives.

It is significant to note what Simon is feeling during that great catch of fish. He recognizes that the power of God is at work in Jesus, and in the clear presence of God, he feels utterly unworthy. He says to Jesus, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner.” (Luke 5:8) But what he hears from Jesus is a *word of grace*. Jesus accepts him, calling him to be a disciple, in spite of what Simon conceives to be his considerable imperfections. Thus Simon finds forgiveness in Jesus. That word of grace is surely what we need to hear, and what we are invited also to show to others.

Along this line, Simon also experiences in Jesus a *word of welcome*. It is highly significant here to note who exactly Jesus is calling to be his disciples. Jesus is beginning the most important movement in the history of humanity, and he is choosing his leadership team. You would think that he would choose the brightest and the best. That would surely mean people with education and leadership experience and standing in the society. The logical place to look for such leaders—one would have thought at the time—would have been within the Sadducees or Pharisees—two organizations which in that day contained the most upstanding and devout and religiously trained citizens in Jewish society. But although there would ultimately be some Pharisees among Jesus’ followers, Jesus did not choose any of his disciples from that illustrious group. Instead, he chose people out of the peasant class. From the perspective of the rulers of the day, Jesus was choosing his disciples out of the dregs of society. Indeed when Simon exclaimed, “Depart from me, Lord, I am a sinner,” he likely was reflecting some of the thinking that had been ingrained upon him—the attitude of the day was that people like him were not good enough to be included among top religious leaders. But Jesus, the Son of God, chose Simon to be one of the first of his disciples. Here is a theme that we will see throughout the ministry of Jesus—Jesus continually welcomes people who otherwise have been excluded and despised. That word of welcome, by which Jesus welcomes everyone, continues to be

of enormous importance today. Jesus welcomes each one of us into fellowship with him, and inspires us as a church to be a community that welcomes all.

In connection with that welcome, Simon also hears from Jesus a *word of promise*—about what he can ultimately become. This occurs during the encounter described in the gospel of John, when Jesus says to him, “You will be called Cephas,” a name which in Aramaic means “rock,” which is rendered in Greek as Peter, which likewise means “rock.” A rock is something solid and strong; but Simon Peter did not look like a rock at this point, nor would he look much like a rock for some time. Three years later, when Jesus was arrested, Simon Peter would deny Jesus and flee. Some rock. And yet Jesus saw what Simon Peter, by God’s transforming grace and empowerment, could become; and he was right—Simon Peter ultimately became a rock of faith who boldly proclaimed the gospel and became a key leader in the early church. So as we are welcomed into connection with Christ, it is with the promise of what Christ can do in us and how Christ can lead us to be a part of God’s work in our time

All this finally comes to one climactic point. There is a reason why the gospel of Mark condenses everything down to just a few verses—it is to make clear the essence of the whole story. Jesus in the end calls Simon and the others to follow, [*Jesus said to them, “Follow me” Mark 1:17*] and the story concludes, “They followed him.” (Mark 1:38) Here it is very clear that faith is not just a set of religious ideas or pleasant dispositions. Faith means *following Jesus*—growing with Christ, being shaped by Christ, joining in the ministry of Christ. It is in following Jesus that we truly experience his grace and welcome and transforming power, and that we find our real purpose in this world. This is the central theme of this sermon series—that faith involves movement! We not only believe in Jesus; we step forth in life trusting in Jesus, and putting our belief into action.

During this sermon series, we will journey alongside the disciples and discover many aspects of what it means to really follow Jesus. The most important thing is what Mark so plainly emphasizes—that we hear Jesus’ call to us and that, along with those ancient fishermen, we follow Jesus today.