

WORTHY OF THEIR LIVES

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
January 24, 2021

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 1:14-20

Following Jesus is the subject of this morning's lesson from Mark's gospel. And as it makes clear, the decision to follow Jesus when he calls means that things may never again be the same. For where is he going? It is only in the following that we can know. It is only in the dropping of what we are doing and going where he leads that we find out. It is, after all, a journey, a direction we head in which, W. H. Auden put it so well, we will "see rare beasts and have unique adventures."¹

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of people," and Peter and Andrew and James and John, that motley crew of fishermen, had the wit to pay attention. They dropped their nets, and left all behind, and followed him.

It's strange don't you think? Odd...that they would do that? But the way Mark tells it, it's just that simple. They dropped their nets almost as if they had been expecting him, almost as if this were that moment for which they had been waiting all their lives. And wouldn't they be fools not to go with him?

Mark gives us a clue as to why they were paying attention. It's embedded in Jesus' message, "The time is fulfilled," Jesus said, "and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news." And for those paying attention, Jesus not only announces the kingdom of God, he embodies it. He not only says what it is, he shows them where it leads.

It leads to a life so open to God that anything can happen. Along the way paralytics will dance, lepers will be cleansed, the weary will find rest, the unstable gain peace, the sick find healing, the poor hear good news, and those in chains will be set free.

No wonder he captured their imagination, those first to hear their names, *Peter, Andrew, James, and John*. He drew them in with an invitation. He captured their attention because he knew who they were, and more, he saw what they might become. So they left their work and followed him.

And I wonder, if you had been in their shoes, would you have done what they did—drop everything and go after him? I mean, would any of us do such a thing? What was it about him that caught their attention?

Was it something in his appearance? Was there something in his gait?

Or was it the authority with which he spoke, the way he met those who went out to hear him? The crowds noticed that. He spoke with authority, they said, not like the scribes and Pharisees.

¹ W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being – A Christmas Oratorio," 1944.

Or was it something that Mark does not tell us that caught their attention, something implied between the pages, something that we only hear and see later, but that the disciples recognized right away?

Who knows? I don't know what it was that they saw. How does anyone know where life will take them if they follow this lead or that? Robert Frost once said, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."²

Where will he lead them? What will happen next? Mark opens the door on an adventure the end of which is not in sight as it begins except of course we know that John the Baptist has been arrested, which casts an ominous shadow on all that follows. This is a story that may not end well. And yet it is an adventure worth throwing oneself into, for the sake of not missing it.

You've probably heard that old aphorism that life is what happens when you're making other plans. And isn't that the truth? You think you're headed in one direction and suddenly an opportunity occurs and you follow the lead, and there you are.

Maybe what the disciples saw in Jesus was one who knew where he was going. And that is not always the case is it?

And maybe that's what those disciples saw in Jesus, one who knew where he was going. So many people don't, you know. He had a simple enough message, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news of the gospel." Would that all sermons were that short and to such effect.

I think that one of the things that most of us are looking for in life is something worthwhile on which to spend what we have. Something worthwhile to do with our lives, a work worth devoting to our skill and attention. A gift we can share. A passion that we can live. And maybe that's what they saw in him. Someone who had so laid hold of life that you leave what you doing and do something else, in order to be a part of it.

We tend to think that ministers are the only ones with a calling like that in life. But that's not so. To define Christian vocation within the parameters of only one calling, the ordained ministry, limits not only Christianity, but also the value and worth of all our lives. We know from experience, that there are things to which all of us are called in life, if only we have the wit to pay attention. Especially if we have the wit to pay attention.

Tom Long, a professor at Emory University, has asked the question,

How would you know how to recognize that God is calling you? Well, [he says,] sometimes this call touches down deep inside of us in those secret places in our lives that give us the most joy. Maybe it's that you like music or you like to sing or you like to play an instrument. Maybe you like to talk with other people. Maybe you like to work with children. Maybe you like to teach. Sometimes the call of God works as the spirit stirs up our joy and passion in that secret place in our lives.³

² Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*. Robert Frost (1874–1963). Mountain Interval. 1920.

³ Thomas J. Long, "Where You Never Expected to Be," Sermon preached on *30 Good Minutes*, Program 5004, Oct 22, 2006.

And maybe that's what Peter and Andrew, James and John experienced that day that Jesus came by and bid them follow. They found a new focus for their lives, not just something more for them to do, but rather something passionate in which they could lose themselves.

The multi-talented Barbara Brown Taylor tells in one of her books about a time in her life when she was struggling with her sense of call. She just couldn't figure out where her life should go and what she should do, as if one can control where life will go at all.

Did God want her to be a writer? Did God want her to be a priest? Did God want her to be a social worker? Did God want her to teach? She just didn't know. She says that in her frustration one midnight, she fell down on her knees in prayer and said, "Okay, God. You need to level with me. What do you want me to be? What do you *want* me to do? What are you *calling* me to do?" She said she felt a very powerful response, God saying, "Do what pleases you. Belong to me, but do what pleases you." She said it struck her as strange that God's call could actually touch that place of her greatest joy, that she could be called to do the thing that pleases her the most.⁴

I think a lot of us imagine that what would please God most is if we were doing what pleases us least. And for my money that is not what discipleship is about, nor is it what this story of the call of the first disciples is describing. They did, after all, *willingly* drop their nets and follow Jesus.

Frederick Buechner says, "Our calling is the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Imagine that. "Our calling is where our deepest gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁵

I wonder if that's what the disciples understood that day when Jesus came walking by and called their names and invited them to fish for people; that the world was hungering for something, and they were just the ones to give it.

I doubt it came easily to them once they tried their hand at it. The gospels make it abundantly clear that they faltered in their vocation. They didn't understand Jesus much of the time. They doubted and questioned what he was saying occasionally. Charged with authority over the demons and sent to preach the gospel, they came back still not sure what they were doing.

They were not the most polished group if you were going to start an inner circle to bear the news of the arrival of the long-awaited messiah. If I were Jesus, I would have wanted some folks with more polish than they had, a few with a gift for words perhaps, a theologian or two to set into context the miracles they would see. A writer to set things down as an eyewitness narrative.

Instead, they were confused about who he was, didn't get his parables, missed the cues he gave them as they entered the last days of his life, didn't trust his insistence that he must suffer and die, and when the chips were down at the end, the night when it

⁴ Long, *Ibid.*

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 119.

counted most, one of them betrayed him, another denied him, and all of them scattered as he was taken away for trial.

What did Jesus see in them? What could he have found in them worth calling? Who knows? What does he see in any of us, or why would he call any of us to follow? But that is not the point. The point is not to understand his reasoning. It is to respond to his invitation as he calls our name and bids us follow.

And the irony is that he knows our failings, he knows our confusion, he knows that we are only dust, and still he calls us. He knows us through and through and loves us still and all, even as he loved those first disciples Peter and Andrew and James and John. And of course, he knew that they were only human, and of course he realized that they had a long way to go, which is why he invited them to follow.

Maybe that's it, maybe that's why they followed, because for once someone believed so much in them that it called out more than they ever realized that they had in themselves. Because for all that was not enough in them, by following him, they became more than enough, they exceeded more than they ever thought possible for themselves.

As you know, I came out of retirement to become your Interim Pastor and to walk with Union Church through this period of pastoral transition. In the not-too-distant future, that assignment will end. What comes next? I don't know. Sarah and I have no home to return to and no specific plans. We trust that the way will become clear.

Like me, you may not be sure today where Jesus is calling you. But I do know that if Jesus is the one who is making the call, it is always a call first and foremost to follow him. And Jesus will not settle down. Like the first disciples, we do not have to have faith in how these changes are going to work out, in where we are going, or in our ability to cope with the losses and obstacles along the way. We do not even have to have faith in ourselves. All we are asked is to have faith in the one who calls and who loves us too much to leave us alone.

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.