



“Answering the Call”
Scripture – Mark 1:14-20
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 11, 2018

John (not his real name) is under constant pressure at work. Before he completes a project, his boss slaps two more on him. The emails keep stacking up in his inbox and each day he falls further behind. He ratchets up the number of hours he works, but it is never enough.

When he arrives home at the end of the day, his wife and children steer clear because every fiber in his body is taut and ready to snap. His tension is contagious and puts the whole family on edge. Within half an hour the kids are tangling with each other and he is screaming at them. His wife jumps in to referee. She tries to lower the heat, but has little success. Each night after the lights are out, she pleads with God for peace. Just a little peace. Is that too much to ask?

A thirtysomething couple yearns for a baby, but to no avail. A senior in high school is dying to hear from a college, but no word. A lonely widow sits by her phone waiting for it to ring. Have you ever hungered for something but only tasted disappointment? Have you had the feeling that life is not unfolding as you had hoped it would? Have you ever felt that even though life is good and you should feel satisfied, something is still missing?

Today’s passage from the Gospel of Mark describes Jesus calling people to a new life. He calls on four fisherman to cast their nets not into the water, but down on the ground. He summons them to follow him so they can learn how to be citizens of God’s kingdom.

Growing up in Oklahoma, I have wonderful fishing memories. My Grandparents owned a small, brick cabin near a picturesque lake. The cabin was simple and cramped, and it took 90 minutes to make the trip from our home in Tulsa, but I thought going to the lake was a marvelous adventure. Grandfather Knox had a metal fishing boat with a meager 15 horsepower engine that would putter us around the lake.

Even though I was only eight years-old, I still remember one amazing day – what our family always called “The greatest catch ever.” My dad was in the front of the boat, my grandfather was in the stern, and I was sitting on the bench in the middle. This was no picturesque day with blue skies overhead. It was cold, windy, and rainy. My grandfather guided the boat up to a spot where a tree had fallen into the water, and like a submarine’s periscope, a single branch reached above the surface. We had barely gotten our poles into the water before my dad was reeling in the first fish. That was the start of a frenzy that lasted an hour. We caught 52 large crappies. Okay, my father and grandfather caught 50 fish and I caught two.

The haul was so immense that we called all the neighbors over the next day for a huge fish fry. Going to the lake was great fun for the whole family. Dad and grandfather were away from work, my sister and I were away from school, and the lake provided endless opportunities.

While the lake has always meant a place to have fun and relax to me, it was exactly the opposite for the four men mentioned in this morning's Scripture. For Simon and Andrew, James and John, it was work – smelly, back-breaking work. In the blistering days of summer and the bone-chilling weeks of winter, they had to fish for a living. And lest we have an idyllic image of fishing in the ancient world, the Roman politician Cicero wrote, “The most shameful occupations are those which cater to our sensual pleasures, fish-sellers, butchers, cooks, poultry-raisers, and fishermen.”¹

Scholar K. C. Hansen has researched the conditions around the Sea of Galilee in the first century to help us better understand the context within which Jesus spent much of his ministry. This body of water is actually a large fresh water lake, not a sea. It is twelve miles long and seven miles wide, and fed from the north by the Jordan River.

In the first century, this territory was part of the Roman Empire. During the life of Jesus, the ruthless Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, ruled this area for Rome. When Jesus was about 18 years old, Caesar Augustus died, and Tiberius became the Roman emperor. To curry favor, Herod Antipas began building a major city on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee and named it after the new ruler. It became such a dominant city, that the Sea of Galilee was also called Lake Tiberius.

You remember that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, which is 15 miles west of the lake. Some scholars think that Jesus may have worked in Tiberius because Herod needed as many carpenters and stone masons as he could find.

According to Hansen, “The primary function of this city was to regulate the fishing industry.”² That meant every fish caught in the Sea of Galilee was taxed by the occupying power. An early case of taxation without representation.

So, when Simon and Andrew, James and John tossed down their nets to follow Jesus, it was not simply walking away from their profession, it was also an act of rebellion. They were rejecting the status quo in favor of a new path. It was a high risk proposition, because they had only a vague idea of who Jesus was and where he would lead them. But it was also exciting for these young men and held the potential of something remarkable. Following Jesus required both courage and determination, and maybe that is why Jesus made fishermen his first choice.

They were daring enough to go out on a large body of water miles from shore with nothing but a sail and oars. That takes grit. And fishing – where banner days are rare – requires perseverance.

After they began to follow Jesus, it was not always easy. Sometimes they questioned Jesus, other times they met hostile crowds, but they found that Jesus satisfied a hunger in their souls.

Jesus has been calling people for the past 2,000 years, and unfortunately he is often received with much less enthusiasm than those first disciples exhibited. Jesus is constantly running into people who say, “Sure, I’ll follow you; someday.” Someday I will spend more time in prayer. Someday I will serve meals to the homeless. Someday I will take on a just cause. Someday I will have coffee with a friend who has lost a loved one or her job or her confidence. Someday, but not now.

Someday I will carve out the time – I promise. Someday I’ll rearrange my priorities – scout’s honor. Someday I will stop keeping Jesus on the periphery of my life, but not right now.

I have news. Jesus will not wait until your calendar clears. He summons you to follow him today – wherever you are in your life. Jesus calls you to listen to *his* words above all other words – above family tradition, political platform, friends’ advice, professors’ teachings, homespun wisdom, columnists’ opinions, best-selling books, graduation speeches, Facebook posts, Ted Talks, blogs, and tweets.

I am not saying we should block out all pieces of advice and gems of wisdom. I am saying that if we respond to the call of Jesus to follow him, we will measure every other word by his words. And we know his words: to treat others with the same care and respect with which we want to be treated; to counter deception with truth; to resist injustice; and to ward off survival of the fittest thinking by seeking the common good.

Some ask: When are we confronted with the call to follow Jesus? Whenever we face a temptation, whenever we meet someone new, whenever we encounter an injustice, whenever we know someone is suffering, whenever we decide how to spend our money.

Each day – multiple times each day – Jesus calls us to follow *his* way rather than some other way. However, it is a constant struggle because we are not always as strong as we wish. Our faith can become fragile when we encounter suffering.

Our joy can quickly fade when challenges mount. Our will can turn timid in the face of opposition. Our hope can collapse in times of crisis.

The truly sad part of our resistance is that God wants to lead us on an adventure and we keep settling for safety and complacency. God wants to satisfy the deep hunger of our souls, but we settle for the same old diet.

Shannon Kershner is the senior pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. She recalls a summer day when a bus was poised “to take senior highs from their youth group, along with low income, inner city kids on a trip. It was called A Justice Journey Tour. It was a route through the South that marked major events in the civil rights movement.”

“As the teenagers piled onto the bus, Kershner stood next to another mother. Kershner’s daughter was going on the trip and so was this mother’s son – he was a young man from the inner city. Kershner asked the mother if her son was excited. She nodded enthusiastically and said he had never had the opportunity to leave Chicago. So even though the trip felt risky and the young man and his mother were both nervous, they were also excited about all that he might learn from the experience and how it would impact his future.”

Kershner said, “The hope that the mother and I shared for our kids was that the experience of seeing places that marked moments of faithful resistance and risk-taking for justice would help them know more about what has been and what could be, if they claimed the dream of working towards God’s beloved community for everyone... [Those mothers] hoped that the imagination-expanding experience would give their kids the courage to follow Jesus whenever he calls.”³

Following the way of Jesus is almost never easy. But that is the way it is with things that are truly worthwhile.

May you accept the challenge. It will satisfy the hunger in your soul and you will become a gift to the world.

NOTES

1. Ched Myers, “Let’s Catch Some Big Fish!” January 22, 2015.
2. Ibid.
3. Shannon Kershner, “The Tragedy of Zebedee,” January 21, 2018.