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Mark 1:16-20
3rd Message
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A VOICE BY THE SEA

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

In 1933, a young professor of theology left his position at the University of Berlin to join the Confessing Church in its struggle against the Nazis, who had co-opted the national church. A fellow professor commented, “It is a great pity that our best hope in the faculty is being wasted on the church struggle.” The man not only abandoned his privileged position, he also did so at great risk to himself. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s story and writings have inspired thousands to follow Jesus no matter the cost.

So far in the Gospel of Mark, we’ve heard a voice in the wilderness and a voice from the heavens. We’ve listened to John, a prophet of God, and we’ve listened to God himself. John told us to repent, to confess our sins, and to be baptized. God told Jesus, “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well-pleased.” Inasmuch as faith in the gospel unites us with Jesus, we heard God speak to us as well. Listening to the voice of John, we take down the “no admittance” sign we have placed outside our hearts. Believing the gospel, we let the Father in to speak to our hearts: “You are my beloved son; in you I am well-pleased.” Now we’re ready to listen to a voice by the sea. Today, Jesus, the Son of God, bids us to follow him. If we follow him, he will shape us for purposes that perfectly suit our lives.

Mark 1:16-20:

As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him.(1)

Inauspicious beginning

The first 15 verses of Mark’s gospel featured earth-shaking events: John the Baptist thundered, the heavens parted, the Spirit descended, and God spoke—all to identify Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, God’s final king. Jesus went off to the wilderness to face Satan, humanity’s greatest foe, and began proclaiming that the kingdom of God was on the verge of being established. Mark has led us to expect a climax to the story of Israel—indeed, to the story of humanity. It comes as a surprise,

then, that in the next scene Jesus is strolling along the seashore and chatting up common laborers. At first, the story in Mark 1:16-20 is a letdown.

Mark reported that Jesus saw the heavens open and the Spirit descend (Mark 1:10). By contrast, in the narrative Jesus next sees four fishermen—insignificant men by most accounts. If Jesus is the Messiah, anointed by God’s Spirit to bring in the kingdom, and these are the men he chooses for his mission, some might question the validity of his quest. Strange as it may seem, the establishment of the kingdom of God has something to do with these men.

Jesus’ inauspicious start is bad news if we want to be spectators but good news if we want to be participants. If we’re interested in watching from the sidelines, we’re going to prefer something more spectacular. Something spectacular, though, excludes most of us. If Jesus is recruiting superstars, most of us will be left out. If he’s recruiting common laborers, then he’s inviting all of us to have a go. Many of us feel that we don’t have the gifts for effective kingdom work. Some would like to participate but feel inadequate. Others don’t really want to participate and use feelings of inadequacy as an excuse for remaining on the sidelines. Many of us hang back because we’re afraid of commitment, failure, or looking foolish. In any case, Jesus taps us on the shoulder and says, “You’re on.” Strange as it may seem, the establishment of the kingdom of God has something to do with us. It has something to do with you.

Jesus calls us to follow him

Mark reported in Mark 1:14-15 that Jesus came into Galilee and began preaching about the kingdom of God. The narrative leads us to believe that the four Galileans in verses 16-20 knew of Jesus and his message before he summoned them.

Jesus first invites Simon and Andrew, two brothers, to become his followers. He makes an ambiguous appeal: “I will make you become fishers of men.” To Jews such as Simon and Andrew, the establishment of the kingdom of God means that God will defeat the enemies of his people. The prophets used fishing as a metaphor for God’s judgment against the wicked (Jeremiah 16:16; Ezekiel 29:4, 38:4; Amos 4:2; Habakkuk 1:14-17). Jesus himself invoked the prospect of such judgment when he compared the kingdom of God to a dragnet that gathers fish from the sea (Matthew 13:47). Jesus spoke like a revolutionary, complete with kingdom-of-God language. Is he now raising an army? When Simon and Andrew cast nets, they are not practicing catch-and-release fishing. Their objective is not to bless the fish but to kill them. Is Jesus, like the three revolutionaries Luke refers to in Acts, saying that he will turn his recruits into sword-wielding fishers of men? (Acts 5:36-37, 21:38)

Later, Jesus had to rebuke James and John for asking permission to command fire to consume would-be opponents (Luke 9:54). He also had to tell Simon, whose name he had changed to Peter, “Put the sword into the sheath” (John 18:11). More than likely, Simon and Andrew would have interpreted Jesus’ summons, at least in part, as a call to military readiness. Jesus, it seems, was deliberately ambiguous. His revolution would be upside down and inside out. No one, including his first followers, was ready for it. At this time, he couldn’t tell his followers, as he would later tell them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mark 8:34).

Although Ezekiel, like other prophets, used fishing as a metaphor of judgment, he also used it in connection with the new age: “And it will come about that fishermen will

stand beside it; from Engedi to Eneglaim there will be a place for the spreading of nets. Their fish will be according to their kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea, very many” (Ezekiel 47:9-10). Ezekiel transformed an image of judgment into an image of salvation. Jesus, in keeping with Ezekiel’s prophecy, is summoning fishermen for the sake of saving men and women, not judging them.

Some of us hear Jesus’ call to follow him in an unmistakable way. Others feel something more subtle. All of us who begin following Jesus, though, are responding to something that resonates with our hearts. Whether Jesus plainly calls us or obliquely calls us, something about him—and something about the prospect of following him—attracts us. We believe, however faintly, that we can trust our lives to him. Coming from Jesus, two simple words carry enormous power to change a life. Listen to Jesus. He’s speaking to you: “Follow Me.”

When migratory species sense a change in the weather, they somehow know it’s time to begin their long journeys. The words “Follow Me” are like a change in the weather. When we sense them, we know it’s time to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

When we begin following Jesus, however, we really don’t know what we’re getting into. We don’t know what he’s going to ask us to do. Following Jesus means submitting to his vision for your life. It usually takes a while to catch his vision, though. We often start out with the assumption that Jesus will submit himself to our vision. Some teaching that even passes itself off as Biblical encourages us to believe such rubbish. Our crises of faith often come when we realize that our vision doesn’t match reality.

Jesus shapes us for his mission to the world

Even if Simon and Andrew misunderstood what Jesus was up to, they knew he was up to something. He isn’t inviting them to partake in some private religious experience; he’s giving them a mission. He’s calling them to do something for God’s sake in the world. The mission, however, isn’t dependent on Simon and Andrew. It’s dependent on Jesus, who takes upon himself the task of transforming them into fishers of men and women. He’s not asking them to transform themselves; he’s asking them to follow him. If they follow him, he will transform them.

Make no mistake: he’s asking much of these men. He’s asking them to leave their livelihood—what they depend on for survival. The transformation he promises, however, resonates with their present vocation. What they will do (fish for people) is similar to what they have been doing (fishing for fish). Jesus is not going to turn them into something completely different from what they are now. What they know now will be useful as Jesus gives them a new vocation. Their current vocation has prepared them for their future vocation. They know fishing, but they also depend on fishing. If they depend on Jesus, he’ll show them a whole different kind of fishing.

Simon and Andrew sign on without hesitation. They leave their nets—they leave their lives—to follow Jesus.

Jesus is not inviting us to join something that enriches our relationship with God but leaves the world unchanged. Yes, he wants to enrich our relationship with God, but he wants to do so in the context of showing us God’s heart for the world. He gifts each of us differently so that each of us contributes differently to the work of the kingdom. He calls some to work on the front lines and others to work behind the scenes, but he calls all of us to work so that we, as his church, may follow him into the world.

If the call to mission intimidates us, we might take solace in Jesus' words to Simon and Andrew. He didn't ask them to be fishers of men; he said he would make them become fishers of men. The mission is not dependent on us; it's dependent on Jesus. It's his mission, not ours. Our task is to follow him, which involves spending time with him and listening to him. If we follow Jesus, he will continually transform us into men and women who serve God's purposes in the world. It is Jesus' job to make you what he wants you to be. It is your job to cooperate with him.

Every now and then, you hear about someone, often an entertainer, who has "reinvented herself." In order to keep from becoming passé, she develops a new persona. Perhaps an entertainer can reinvent her persona, but she can't reinvent her personality. Many people have no issue with Jesus' promise to transform them; they're just not sure they can trust him to transform them into the kind of people they want to be. I joke, from time to time, that my gregarious 4-year-old daughter has the personality I wanted. Jesus is not going to change your personality. The gospel, on the other hand, gives you no reason to *want* to change your personality. It gives you every reason to believe that Jesus will endorse your God-given personality. Nothing happens instantly. You "become" a fisher of men and women. You become—and are becoming—most truly yourself as you present yourself to Jesus.

What does Jesus want? He wants you: your authentic self. He doesn't tell Simon and Andrew to clean up their acts. No, he tells them, "Follow Me." If you embrace Jesus' acceptance of you, then your world's acceptance of you will shrink in importance. You'll be increasingly liberated to offer your authentic self to your world. You bless the world with your authentic self: the authentic self that Jesus is liberating.

Jesus promises to change us into something different, but not something entirely different. He took fishermen and turned them into fishermen of a different kind. The vocation that Jesus gives you will make sense. It will connect with your history and resonate with your passions. It will not be limited to one segment of your life. It will not be confined to your "ministry" or your "job." It will permeate your entire life. And it—you!—will bless the world in some way.

Don't try to change yourself. Don't force yourself to be someone you're not. Don't go looking for passion. Don't try to become a fisher of men. If you'd rather be a consumer than a fisher, tell Jesus. If you don't care that much about his mission to the world, let him know. Instead of feeling guilty, try confession. It's not your job to care; it's Jesus' job to make you care. Present yourself to Jesus, listen to him, and let him work in your heart. If you hang out with him, he'll share his passion with you. You'll begin to care about what he cares about. Watch for the people and opportunities he brings your way. Be attentive to "coincidences" that have his fingerprints. Stick close to Jesus as we study the Gospel of Mark. He'll put the right things on your heart and get you moving in the right direction at the right time. He will shape you for his mission to the world. He will lead you in the way of the Lord.

As I considered the choice whether to follow Jesus or not when I was 16 years old, I was afraid that I would have to give up sports. At that point in my life, nothing mattered more to me than playing baseball and basketball. I didn't know much about following Jesus, but I knew that committing my life to him meant submitting to his vision for my life. I read a tract that told me that my interests would change if I accepted Christ. Well, I didn't want my interests to change. I accepted Christ anyway and began following him. Turns out I didn't have to give up sports—at least not right away. After college, I continued to play in softball and basketball leagues. But in my late 20s, I was sidelined

by a knee injury. I remember limping off the court and into the locker room, where I railed against the realization that I had probably played my last game.

Unable to do what I loved with my free time, I began spending more time studying the Scriptures for the Bible studies I had started teaching. The more I studied and the more I taught, the more I wondered whether the Lord was calling me out of my journalism career and into something that involved the Scriptures. For 15 years, ever since I was a junior in high school, I had never thought of being anything other than a journalist. But my interest in sports and journalism began to wane, and my interest in the Scriptures and shepherding became an irresistible passion. Today I'm a pastor with an insatiable appetite for the Scriptures. The tract was right: my interests changed. My current work as a pastor, though, is not unrelated to my prior work as a journalist. Studying the Scriptures is much like copy editing. Teaching the Scriptures is much like reporting. Counseling people is much like interviewing. As a journalist, I wrote. As a pastor, I write. I take it that Jesus shaped me—and continues to shape me—for his mission.

The cost of following Jesus

The call of James and John mirrors the call of Simon and Andrew. In each case, Jesus walks along the sea and calls two fisherman brothers who leave to follow him. The significant additions are that James and John leave their father and the family's hired servants. Family obligations were considered sacrosanct in their world. Moreover, their family was in such a position that it could afford to hire servants. For James and John, the call of Jesus takes precedence over both family and wealth. It is no accident that Jesus calls two pairs of brothers, for Mark will later show that Jesus is forming a new family. (Mark 3:13-35).

Jesus' call of the four men echoes God's call of Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham. God told Abram:

Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

When God called Abraham, he advanced his plan to rescue the world by forming a new family, which became the people of Israel. Now Jesus forms a new family out of the people of Israel in faithfulness to God's commitment to rescue the world. Jesus' words to the four men are simple but epoch-making.

Courageously, Simon, Andrew, James, and John begin following Jesus. But they have no idea what they're getting in for. They believe following Jesus has something to do with the kingdom of God, but Jesus will overturn all their preconceptions of what the kingdom of God is about. He will open their eyes to see the kingdom as it really is, and they will learn to participate in its triumph. They will follow Jesus, in and around Galilee, and then on to Jerusalem, where their dreams will die, only to be born again with wings. Their journey would be an epic one.

Make no mistake: Jesus asks much of us. His first followers left their families, their jobs, and their finances. We don't know that he'll ask us to do the same, but we

don't know that he won't. We do know that the call of Jesus takes precedence over family, job, and finances and that following him will inform every aspect of our lives. You follow Jesus, not your family. You follow Jesus, not your career ambitions. You follow Jesus, not the money. If you follow Jesus, you may have to say no to your family's wishes for you. You may have to say no to conventional notions of career and income. Everything you do in your job (and in the rest of your life, for that matter), you do in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17). You know that the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil and that you are only a steward of that which you possess (1 Timothy 6:10).

Many children grow up with the belief that their parents' greatest dreams for them concern getting good grades and landing well-paying jobs. Child rearing in these parts has become a competition sport. Many parents are so obsessed with the performance of their children that they never actually get to know them. By forcing their vision down their children's throats, parents kill their children's hearts. An obsession with prosperity is understandable if your greatest ambitions concern success in this world. But if a new world is coming, and in fact is already present in the Holy Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, then such an obsession is sadly misplaced. Following Jesus will mean academic achievement and vocational wealth for some but not all. Some of us will have to break with our family's vision for our lives.

Jesus asks much of us, but he also gives much to us. If following him costs us our family, he gives us a new family of countless brothers and sisters. If following him costs us a job, he gives us a vocation that permeates our entire lives and blesses the world. If following him costs us the shekels of earth, he gives us heavenly riches that we can take with us. If following Jesus costs us our lives, he gives us new lives.

Upon leaving his privileged position at the university, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "My calling is now clear to me, and what God will make of it I do not know." God made something of Bonhoeffer's calling; he also made something of his life. After Bonhoeffer joined the Confessing Church, the Gestapo forbade him to speak publicly. He was imprisoned and then sent to concentration camps. On April 9, 1945, he was hanged naked from the gallows of Flossenburg Concentration Camp, thrown into a pile of corpses and burned—only a few days before the city was liberated. He was 39 years old.

"When Christ calls a man," wrote Bonhoeffer, "he bids him come and die." Bonhoeffer espoused "costly grace" instead of "cheap grace": "Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.(2) Bonhoeffer followed Jesus. He lost his job; then he lost his life. In return, Jesus gave him true life.

Born again with wings

So we listen for the voice by the sea and follow where it leads. Following Jesus not only means submitting to his vision for your life at the outset, it also means allowing him to correct your vision as you walk with him. Jesus will overturn our preconceptions of what the kingdom of God is all about and open our eyes to see it as it really is. He will teach us to participate in its triumph. He will also tell us, in so many words, as he told Peter, "Put the sword into the sheath." If we follow Jesus, he will shape us for his mission to the world. Our dreams will die, only to be born again with wings. Our journey, like

that of the first disciples, will be an epic one. It will not be easy, but it will lead to true life.

David Roper, a former pastor of this church, remembers taking his 5-year-old boy with him to pick up a new babysitter. An enormous dog was lying on the front porch:

The dog hadn't growled or in any way indicated that he was hostile. But the minute I rang the doorbell, he lunged for my boy, who jumped four feet through the air, shinnied up my leg, and climbed right into my arms, and there he was, all snug and secure while the dog was gnawing on my shin! I was jumping around on one foot, trying to kick him with the other. Finally, a lady came to the door and called the dog off. As I was limping out back to the car, my boy, still clinging around my head said to me, "Daddy, I will go anywhere with you!"(3)

Jesus tells us, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." We tell Jesus, "I'll go anywhere with you."

I wonder where he'll take us.

Notes

(1) Literary structure:

A Jesus walks along the sea (16a)

B Jesus sees and calls two fisherman brothers: Simon and Andrew (16b-17)

C Brothers leave their nets to follow Jesus (18)

A' Jesus continues walking along the sea (19a)

B' Jesus sees and calls two fisherman brothers: James and John (19b-20a)

C' Brothers leave their father to follow Jesus (20b)

(2) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books), 7, 47.

(3) David Roper, *The Magnificent Obsession: Philippians 3:1-14* (Palo Alto, CA: Discovery Publishing).

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