

# Fishin' With Jesus: Answering the Call to Discipleship

Mark 1:14-20    Isaiah 6:1-8    Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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This morning we're going to explore the issue of what it means in your life and mine, and in the life of this congregation, to answer the call to discipleship. As a way to get into this topic, let's take a look at this morning's Gospel reading from the first chapter in Mark.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> verse of this gospel, Mark – with an exceptional economy of words – has already introduced us to John the Baptist, told of Jesus' baptism and his time of temptation in the wilderness, that John has been arrested, and now moves to the inauguration of Jesus' ministry.

Mark places the narrative in the area of Galilee declaring that Jesus came “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.’” There several sermons in just those two verses alone, such as addressing the topics:

- What is the good news of God?
- What does it mean that the time is fulfilled?
- What is the kingdom of God anyway, and what does it mean that it has come near?
- What does it mean to repent?
- And what exactly does believing in the good news entail?

Well, perhaps these verses simply acts as a summary statement of what Mark plans to explore later in his gospel; a way to “whet the appetite,” so to speak, to important issues he will delve into with more detail later in his book. And since the lectionary will deal primarily with the Gospel of Mark throughout this year, we too will wait until these issues are fleshed out at a later time.

Mark moves quickly, then, to his story of Jesus calling his first disciples. We're told that as Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw a man named Simon (who will be renamed Peter) and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea. I get a big kick out of Mark adding, “for they were fishermen,” like his readers needed an explanation of why two grown men are throwing a net into the sea.

Jesus simply tells them, “**Follow me and I will make you fish for people.**” While I'm glad the NRSV translation of the Bible has made this remark inclusive, “fishing for people”, we do end up missing the poetry and the play on words:

fishermen now fishing for men. Without any explanation of why, Mark tells us that they “immediately left their nets and followed” Jesus.

This is followed by a similar story of the call to discipleship that Jesus extends to two other brothers, James and John. Still without explanation, Mark tells us that James and John, who had been mending their fishing nets, immediately leave their father Zebedee and the hired hands sitting in the boat.

For modern readers, this is a somewhat disquieting story. It suggests that without reason someone might actually renounce everything to join a cult or a Christian sect just because they hear someone compellingly say, “Follow me.” But that’s not what Mark is suggesting. Rather, he is simply writing in a literary genre we know as a “**call story**,” dozens of which occur throughout the Old and New Testament.

The call of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, which we heard a few moments ago, is one such example. That story involves the bizarre imagery of God sitting on a throne wearing a long robe, surrounded by these 6-winged creatures called Seraphs, one of which took a hot coal from the fire and held it to Isaiah’s lips. Well let’s hope this was a vision, not something that happened literally!

**A primary characteristic of a call story is to explain the abruptness and total commitment demonstrated by those being called.** In the case of Simon and Andrew, they gave up their profession in order to follow Jesus. James and John gave up more than that, for they also violated the patriarchal system of their day by not asking the permission of their father, but simply left him sitting in the boat.

**So rather than attaching too literal of an interpretation to these call stories, their primary purpose was to indicate that discipleship always has a cost.** We, like they, are therefore being informed that most likely we must be willing to give up something in order to bring the good news to others. **I know of no ministry that doesn’t bear a cost, whether it be in the form of the sharing of our time, our talents, and yes, at times our financial resources.**

A major point of both the Isaiah story, and Jesus’ calling of the first disciples is to indicate the **response** of those being called by God. Isaiah responded with, “Here I am, Lord, send me!” The four fishermen, without any explanation of what Jesus was actually calling them to do, responded by immediately following Jesus and joining him in his ministry.

Now, the Bible has some examples of **other types of responses to the call of God**. For example, **Moses’** first response was to say that he had a speech problem and that God should send somebody else. **Jonah’s** first response was to get into a boat and hightail it in the exact opposite direction of where God wanted him to go.

You can probably see where I’m heading with this. It’s to another one of those tough questions that I like asking from time to time: **How have you responded, and how have we responded as a congregation, when you, when we, feel that God has called us into the ministry and service of furthering the**

**kingdom of God?** Even if we begin by giving some kind of justification of why God must have gotten the wrong person, do we usually end up responding by following the call?

**This congregation, for almost a century now, has a long history of answering the call to discipleship.** I'll say more about that in a moment.

Concerning this call to discipleship itself, **how do we "hear" or experience that call in the first place? That, I believe, involves your understanding of God.** Speaking personally, and as a Presbyterian pastor steeped in the Reformed theological tradition, **I believe in a God that interacts with humankind in ways that draw us together into true community; into right, mutual relationships; into acts of love and compassion; into paths of peace, hope, and justice.**

Yet, trying to precisely describe just *how* God calls us varies, I believe, from person to person. I've always contended that **God speaks to each individual in the way that that person can hear and understand.** Again, that most likely depends upon each own theological understanding of God. Not only that, how we hear God's call may even change throughout our own journey of faith. It has in mine.

I believe there are a few things, however, that might help us to hear, to discern God's call to follow. As far as your personal ministry within the life of this congregation is concerned, I would suggest that **God is calling you to the particular service that excites you the most; the type of ministry you feel most compassionate and passionate about; the projects that energize you, not drain you.**

That was certainly the case with the **Rev. Thad Holcombe**, who served both as an associate pastor here at College Hill, and as the director at the United Campus Ministry program next door at TU back in the late 60s and 70s. Forty year ago, Thad, along with other neighborhood pastors and congregation members and university students, **heard the call of God to help promote community organizing and outreach to this struggling neighborhood.**

The response to that call led to the formation of Kendall Whittier Ministry, now **Kendall Whittier, Inc.** Under the current strong executive director leadership of our own **Trinna Burrows**, this congregation, in partnership with others, continues to hear the call of God to minister to our neighbors here in Kendall Whittier. Perhaps you are one of those hearing that call.

Here's another call story from here in Tulsa. You may have read the inspirational article on the cover page of Saturday's *Tulsa World*, where 10-year old Josh Howard felt bad about not helping a homeless person as he left the BOK Center with his dad after a hockey game last December. So now, Josh and some friends, sensing a call to serve others, are filling zip-lock bags with some items (like bus tokens, water bottles, and snacks) so that when they are approached again they might help a homeless person.

So let me ask again, how are you being called to ministry and service to and with others? **Both the spiritual and practical elements involved with discerning God's call to discipleship are extremely important to me personally**

**and pastorally, and, I believe, to the ongoing health and growth of this congregation.**

So we will continue to explore these issues throughout this year, including how we are discerning a call to action, and especially how that impacts our Outreach & Mission and Evangelism efforts.

Upon hearing Jesus' call to discipleship, those four fishermen started a new kind of fishing – fishin' with Jesus to promote the kingdom of God through a ministry of service and compassion to others.

And God continues to call you and me as well, and us together as College Hill, to this new kind of fishin'. And as always, **how you and I respond to that call to discipleship is up to each one of us.**

Amen.