

Sermon, Epiphany 3B 1/21/2024, St. David's Episcopal, Mark 1:14-20 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Last week, we heard the call of the Christ's disciples from the perspective of the Gospel of John. This week we are back in Mark, our main Gospel for this church year, with the same story but a different twist.

In John's Gospel, Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist, and followed Jesus after John pointed him out and after Jesus asked, "What are you looking for?" He was invited to "come and see," and then Andrew got his brother Simon.

Last week, we heard about Nathanael, and how he believed after Jesus told Nathanael that Jesus had seen him under the fig tree. That was enough to change Nathanael's heart.

This week's story, however, is sparser. This time, John the Baptist isn't directing anyone to Jesus: instead, John has been arrested. The word translated "arrested" more precisely means "handed over." While Mark tends to be stingy with his words and scenes, his verbs often pack a punch, and being handed over—or arrested—feels like foreshadowing of what happens to those who follow God's call. John the Baptist was handed over, and eventually Jesus would be betrayed and arrested, or handed over, as well.

In this version of the call story, Simon and Andrew are pictured fishing. Jesus tells them to follow him and he will make them fish for people. We get the second appearance of Mark's favorite word, "immediately": "and immediately they left their nets and followed him.

What a picture this paints. If he approached them while they were casting their nets, does that mean the nets were already in the water and fish were starting to get tangled up in them? Did they haul them in and leave dying fish on the beach—or did they leave the net in the water? Did they drop the net before they went into the water? Did other fishermen come get the net or did they basically litter by literally leaving their net in order to go follow the Lord?

The hymn that we sang before the Gospel reading describes them as "happy, simple fisherfolk." "Contented peaceful fishermen." I wonder if that was true. Would happy contented people drop everything to follow Jesus? I hope so. But I'm skeptical. Are you?

The picture Mark paints of the next two disciples is one that always haunts me. This time, the brothers James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men when they immediately followed Jesus.

Zebedee. The only other times we hear his name in the Bible is in conjunction with his sons, identifying them as the sons of Zebedee. He could have died of a broken heart after they left him. I picture him calling for his sons in a wavering voice as they immediately leapt out of the boat to follow Jesus.

On the other hand, maybe he gave them his blessing. Maybe he said “you boys go ahead; I’m too old. Don’t worry about me, I have these hired men. Go on.” I don’t believe that, though. They left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Jesus. I see Zebedee as forlorn. Abandoned.

Following Jesus is hard and costly. I’m scared to say that on a Sunday morning, when attendance has dwindled to half of what it was before the pandemic. I want to sell church to you as something that Adds Value and Will Make Your Life Better. I do believe that’s true, of course; but I also know that following Jesus is hard and costly. The immediates in these stories mask that, but Zebedee being left makes it harder to forget.

Following Jesus wasn’t always as clear for the disciples as it was in this initial story. As we will hear again and again as the church year goes on, they misunderstood often, and got things wrong, and often seemed to frustrate Jesus with their inability to understand. Really, I find that a lot easier to understand, because I find following Jesus confusing, because everyone seems to have a different idea about what it means.

Can we follow Jesus if we don’t attend church every Sunday? Can we follow Jesus if we vote Democrat? Or Republican? Can we follow Jesus if we aren’t sure what we believe? Can we follow Jesus if we mostly have doubts?

Sometimes our faith journey has cycles. There may be times when we feel deeply connected to God. I imagine that’s how Andrew and Simon and James and John felt in today’s story, when they dropped everything to follow Jesus. We might feel that way after a baptism or confirmation, or after finding a new faith community that fits us well.

But then we can get confused like all of these disciples would go on to become. We drift away, we feel let down. Or we just fall out of the habit of worship.

Maybe we think about things we left behind when we started trying to follow Jesus.

I don’t think following Jesus necessarily means that we will cause rifts in our family. I was lamenting Zebedee to some clergy colleagues this past week, how he haunts me. One woman expressed that she doesn’t experience the same angst over Zebedee, because she knows her father would not have joined her in a quest to follow Jesus. He might have held her back. Maybe it’s better to think of Zebedee metaphorically.

What have you given up or left behind in order to follow Jesus?

When I was little, I wanted to be rich. I told my parents all the time how I was going to be VERY RICH. They would ask me how, and I had no idea, but I assured them that I would be.

I'm not. Part of me is still attracted to wealth, and it's not a part I'm proud of. The longing for such a lifestyle is something I feel like I had to leave behind to follow Jesus. And even so, I know that I am better off than most people in the world. I don't fly on private jets or have the clothes and shoes and fabulous vacations that the wealthy women on the various *Real Housewives* shows do, but I have enormous privilege that I did nothing to earn. And I struggle with how to balance that with my Christianity. And that's an appropriate struggle. Jesus had a lot to say against money and possessions. He didn't have much of either. Greed gets in the way of following Jesus. Desiring more gets in the way of following Jesus. Jealousy of what others have gets in the way.

Sometimes, simple comfort can get in the way. These fishermen gave up a lifestyle and future they knew to follow Jesus. I admire them, even as I feel angst about poor Zebedee.

What gets in the way of you following Jesus? As we move toward Lent, can you think of things you could drop in order to follow him?