

***Listen! Follow Me***  
**Sermon 211 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 21, 2024**  
**Mark 1:14-20**

In these weeks that make up the season of Epiphany we are working our way through Mark's Gospel - at least the beginning - to see how the *good news* that Jesus brought to the world really got off the ground. Last year we did the same kind of study, except we worked through Matthew's Gospel. This year we are in Mark.

Last week we read the first 11 verses and saw how quickly Mark ushered us into the Baptism story. Placing the story of Jesus within the prophetic tradition of Isaiah and then moving us quickly out to the marginal banks of the Jordan where Jesus' strange cousin, John, was baptizing.

For now, we are skipping over the two verses that summarize the whole wilderness temptation narrative - because that is not where Mark seems to draw our attention. While other gospel writers explained in great detail that experience, Mark simply says:

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (1:12-13)*

Ok. Got that part out of the way, no questions? Good. Moving on.

*Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, 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." (1:14-15)*

There is a real distinction in Mark's writing between two layers of story. There is a thread that appears to be a cosmic story and then one that is more of a human story. Almost as if the author is weaving together a tapestry, with the threads of God's activity and the activities of those who dwell here on earth.

John was baptizing, Jesus came. That's where the earthly story begins. Then, the heavens opened up, the Spirit descended, a voice proclaimed a blessing, the Spirit drove Jesus away, Satan tested him, angels attended him... all summarized with just a few short verses, and then we're back to the earthy, human story: John is arrested, Jesus moves through Galilee.

Sometimes this Markan distinction between the cosmic and earthly stories can feel a little bit like the classic Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, where part of the story (dialogue, plot development, etc) takes place in the skies between flashing stars, angels and divine beings, and the other part takes place on earth where George Bailey and Mr. Potter and the other mortal characters are figuring it out in their own ways.

There may come a time in this Gospel where the cosmic story gets to take up more narrative space, but for now it seems like Mark is only going to give us quick summaries of those more supernatural movements; for now, his priority seems to be on the events unfolding a little closer to home. In this part of the story, Mark seems more interested (and perhaps wants us to be more interested) in what's happening here in the earthly story.

So back on earth, where Jesus is traveling around the Sea of Galilee, he sees two sets of brothers who are fishermen by trade. First, Simon and Andrew, then James and John. It is no coincidence that the fishermen happen to be brothers as it was very common in the ancient world for families to share a common trade. With gender roles firmly cemented into the social and economic fabric, fathers would teach sons how to carry on the family business. Mothers would school daughters in the ways of the household. Everything had a place and a purpose. Every person was needed to do their part so that the whole thing - that being the social order - didn't come crumbling down. But here comes Jesus with his summons to undermine all of that - to leave one's place in the family, in society, in the economy - and to follow him instead.

Sometimes Jesus' call is rather abbreviated, summarized in two simple words: *Follow me*. And sometimes it includes a little more detail: *Follow me and I will make you fish for people*.

Now for those of us who have grown up in church, we have heard this funny phrase "fish for people" enough times that we sort of gloss right over it. Subconsciously categorizing it as another cute little thing that Jesus says while he's luring fishermen into gospel ministry. But we can't let ourselves off the hook that easily; inquiring minds want to know: What in the world did Jesus mean when he said, "I will make you fish for people"? And where did that term even come from? Jesus didn't come up with cute little terms to go along with all the disciples' preliminary vocations...Why this one? Why just with the fishermen?

Some scholars like Ched Myers say that Jesus didn't just pull this phrase out of thin air, but much like Mark did earlier in the Gospel by placing Jesus' arrival within the prophetic context of Isaiah, here, Jesus reaches back to his Jewish roots and connects the call of his disciples with the words of the prophets.

Hear these words from Jeremiah 16, words that a faithful Jewish man living in Jesus' day would have recognized as holy scripture, hear them now and let's see what we think:

Therefore the days are surely coming, says the Lord,  
when it shall no longer be said, "*As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt,*" but  
"*As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them*"  
For I will bring them back to their own land  
that I gave to their ancestors.

I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord,

and they shall catch them;

And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks.

For my eyes are on their ways;  
they are not hidden from my presence,  
nor is their iniquity and their sin,  
because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols,  
and have filled my inheritance with their abominations. (16:14-18)

Here, the prophet Jeremiah evokes Exodus imagery to describe a new moment of God's liberation. God sees the people struggling, sinning, and suffering under the yoke of their enemies, the Babylonians in this case. Here, in Jeremiah, the prophet says:

*Look, God is going to liberate you, but in that liberation you will be held accountable for the ways that you have mistreated the outcasts, exploited the earth, and failed to care for the poor.*

As Jesus invokes Jeremiah, he becomes the bridge between heaven and earth. His words join the two narrative threads together. In this peculiar summons, the divine and the human stories converge. The cosmic story becomes the human story with that seemingly simple but oh, so loaded invitation: *Follow me and I will make you fish for people.*

If we are right about this prophetic connection, then the brothers have a serious decision to make. Because Jesus is not simply inviting them to leave their jobs as fishermen so that they can come and work for him. No, Jesus is calling them to leave everything in order to participate in the bigger (cosmic) story of God's kingdom which is drawing near, breaking in, interrupting, undermining, and subverting all existing kingdoms - in real time.

The brothers have a serious decision to make. If they say no, if they decline the invitation, they can carry on and keep the family and social structures intact. They can earn an honest living, raise healthy families, and maintain their place in the world. They could probably even continue to practice their religion! But if they say yes, if they accept Jesus' invitation, all bets are off and their place in the human story gets very uncertain. We might say it would be left behind, in the boats... left in the water with the fish... maybe left to linger with all that stuff we talked about (last week) leaving behind in our own waters, the waters of baptism.

I suppose that given all of this, it is a wonder Simon, Andrew, James, and John... ANYONE for that matter... ever said yes! Especially if they were familiar with their own scriptures and knew what the prophets said about God and divinely appointed fishermen.

The whole thing feels almost miraculous, once we really start to think about it.

Perhaps THAT is why Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor calls this story a miracle story. Because when Jesus calls, invoking the words of Jeremiah, the four immediately follow. Immediately! Given everything that was at stake. They did not hesitate or question. They did not consider all the options, making a list of pros and cons.<sup>1</sup> They did not even go home to pack a bag and say goodbye, they simply left everything behind in order to get to work, *gospel* work.

Taylor goes on to say that this miracle story is “not a story about us. [But] it is a story about God, and about God’s ability not only to CALL us but also to CREATE us as people who are able to follow - able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he *interests* us more than anything else in our lives, because he *seems to know what we hunger for* [perhaps better than we know ourselves] and because he seems to *be food*.”<sup>2</sup>

I wonder if some of us here have ever experienced such a miracle. I wonder if some of us here have experienced the presence of God so real, so compelling that we somehow found the *courage* to leave everything else behind, looking only to Jesus as our sole focus, our primary interest, the very food which fuels our steps each day.

Has anybody here ever heard the call from Jesus: *Follow me!* And responded with a courageous: *Yes!*

Even though many of us have said yes at some time or another, we struggle to stay the course, to keep on following, because we soon learn that being fishers for people - in the way that the prophets proclaimed - is hard and demanding and courageous work.

As the journey of life unfolds, and as time and distance move us ever away from those *thin places* where God felt near and uncertainty felt holy, we sometimes begin to shift our gaze from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we step back toward the boats that served us well when we were simply fishing for fish.

We love our boats and it’s easy to step back into them... “Boats” called status quo. “Boats” called tradition. “Boats” called religious institution. And “boats” called nostalgia. “Boats” called comfort, self-preservation, and certainty... *Boats* of many names but one purpose which is to keep our feet so secure in this kingdom that we forget about, or have no capacity for, or lose our *passion* for God’s kingdom.

How many times have we stepped back into our boats trading the *good news* for the *good life*; and in so doing forgotten what it *really* means to follow Jesus? *Follow me, Jesus says, and I will make you fish for people.*

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<sup>1</sup> Debbie Thomas. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2888-i-will-make> , 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, quoted in <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2888-i-will-make>

Friends, I believe we are in need of another miracle, maybe two. One that enables us to hear the fullness of the call once again: *Follow me! And I will make you fish for people!*

And one that gives us the courage to respond with a resounding and courageous YES! Knowing full well that we have everything to lose, but also everything to gain.

*Lord hear our prayer  
Change our hearts  
Make our feet follow after you.*

*Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done on earth  
as it is in heaven.*

*Amen.*