

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday January 22, 2012

Mark 1:14-20

At the culmination of the ministry of John the Baptist, he was arrested and thrown into jail. He had, fortunately, accomplished that which he had been called to do—he had preached a message of repentance to a great number of people, baptizing them in the River Jordan, preparing them for the coming of the Messiah and, finally, baptizing Jesus.

John’s arrest came about because he demanded full repentance from those whom he baptized, and he spoke harshly, yet honestly, to the Pharisees and Saducees, calling them a “brood of vipers.” He challenged them to bear fruit worthy of repentance, and spoke plainly about the fate of those who refused to honestly repent and change their ways. John also taught the kinds of behaviors that Jesus would teach, about caring for others, sharing, and honest business practices. John also defined the purpose of his ministry as one of preparation for the coming of the Messiah, whose ministry had been prophesied in the book of Isaiah.

John’s message was, naturally, a threat to the cruel and insecure ruler, Herod. And, with pressure from Herod’s wife, Herodias, they believed that the threat would be removed by imprisoning John.

Now John was a quirky fellow, living in the wilderness, clothing himself with camels' hair—a leather belt tied around his waist, his diet consisting of locusts and wild honey. Yet people did listen to him, follow him, and learn from him. But all of that was ended abruptly when John was arrested.

Following his baptism and the forty days of temptation in the desert, Jesus began *his* ministry, for which John had paved the way, by going to Galilee. It was there that *Jesus* began calling people to repentance and to believe in the good news of God, and that the reign of God was very near.

Now, one *might* expect that Jesus would have learned from John's fate that, rather than being seen as a quirky guy—different enough to draw the attention of officials and be imprisoned, that *he* would use a different strategy. He might have chosen to get in with the 'right' crowd—those with wealth, power, or special influence in the land. By getting close to those folks, not only would Jesus have a wider audience for his message, he would have also been aligned with those who might protect him, should the need arise.

But Jesus was neither a strategist nor a politician, and he followed God's ways rather than take on the values of humankind. He knew that true life does not come from wealth or power or status, but by the grace of God. Page 2

Scanning back through the heroes and heroines of the Old Testament, we are reminded that during those times, our God most often chose the least likely people to take on the most important tasks:

-Children or young people like Samuel and David—one called to be a judge and a prophet, the other to be a king;

-Women, such as Miriam who, with her brothers, led the Israelites from slavery to freedom; and Deborah, the judge, who went into battle with her people;

-Foreigners like Rahab the harlot and Ruth the Moabite widow—both of whom are in the lineage of Jesus;

-Slaves, such as Moses and Aaron;

-Tricksters like Jacob, who stole his brother's birthright and blessing;

-and disobedient prophets, like Jonah, who tried to run away from God.

These are just a sampling of the variety of people called by God to accomplish great things in God's name.

In a like manner, Jesus did not call priests, Pharisees, or anyone with political power to join his band of disciples. He, too, chose the least likely people to learn and share in his ministry, to be entrusted to carry it on and to share the gospel throughout their lives. It would be up to this bunch of earthy men of the working class, dishonest outcasts, and others to pass on the gospel news. 3

His most intimate friends included women like Mary and Martha; those who had been cured of demons like Mary Magdalene, and Levi the former tax collector. He spent his time blessing children, healing elderly women, touching those with leprosy, raising the dead such as Lazarus, and—eventually—forgiving those who tortured and murdered him. In every instance, Jesus broke the rules of society, as he enacted the love that defines God’s community.

So the ministry that Jesus was beginning was right within the context of God’s ways throughout history. Thus it was no surprise that rather than head for a palace or temple, when he was ready to choose those whom he would mentor, Jesus went to the beach.

We’ve already established that Jesus wasn’t looking for people of status in the eyes of society. But what *did* he see in four common fishermen, the first two brothers so poor that they didn’t even have a boat, but waded into the water to cast their nets for fish? The second pair of brothers was a little better off, for their family had a boat, as well as hired men working alongside them and their father, Zebedee. So, first, Jesus called out to Simon and Andrew with these words, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” And then he called out to James and John—and all four of them followed him. 4

What might Jesus have been looking for? What might he have seen in these four fishermen? What may have qualified them for the type of work to which he was calling them? I think there are several things:

-These were strong, hard-working men, who were used to the outdoor life--which would be a necessity for discipleship with Jesus at that time.

-These were men who were used to keeping odd hours—up well before dawn to be out and ready for a good catch, and then staying up on beyond nightfall, sorting and preparing the fish for sale. They would be ready for anything at any time of day or night.

-These were not educated men nor were they pretentious. They would be open to learning new ideas and new ways of living.

-Fishermen were not squeamish—they were used to the slime of the sea and the fish—so it was likely that they would not be put off by tasks which involved the healing of those considered untouchable by their families and communities.

-These were hardy men, not likely to give up partway through the journey that lay before them.

-These four already had the bond of brotherhood, as disciples should. 5

So, while Jesus probably recognized these attributes in the four fishermen, what might have motivated them to leave their lifelong work, their homes and their families to follow this stranger who called out to them with the mysterious promise to make them ‘fish for people’?

-Perhaps they had heard tell of this Jesus, whose coming had been heralded by John.

-Certainly Jesus had a charismatic personality, but would that have been enough?

-Was it the thrilling thought of adventure and the unknown?

While any or all of these may have played a part in the responses of Simon, Andrew, James, and John, I think there was something more powerful at work. I believe that when Jesus called out to them, they sensed the power of God within him, along with the Holy Spirit leading them forward.

I do believe that these four men—and the eight disciples who would soon be joining them—had a choice. They could easily have said no—and who could have blamed them? They had the responsibilities of work and family to attend to. And yet they chose to follow Jesus.

The true call of God is not easily ignored.

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As we know, Jesus, the fishermen, and eight others traveled from town to town, healing, teaching, and preaching the good news of God's love and grace. Many, many followers joined them in their ministry, people from all walks of life. And, through it all, Jesus was preparing that original twelve to take on and pass on the message and the faith so that it would be carried forward through every generation to come.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostles and other disciples were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and they received new abilities to call to others as Jesus had called to them.

The ministry and message of Christ deepened and broadened over time. The apostle Paul described it in this way in his letter to the Galatian church, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." From that time onward, everyone who sought Christ would be received, regardless of status or circumstances. The wealthy, the powerful, and those with influence were all invited to share in the family of God in Jesus Christ. And so it continues to be. Not a single person created by God is ever considered to be unequipped to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus still calls to fishermen, as well as to women, to children, to the elderly, to rich and to poor, to healthy and infirm, to the prominent and to the unknown. And as the world's population continues to expand, so do the needs of people around the globe. And so, it will take more and more people to answer Christ's call to follow him.

And that, of course, includes us! Just as he did for Simon and Andrew, James and John, Jesus has a special ministry for each and every individual. Never think that you are too old or too young, or that you do not have the knowledge and the skills to answer yes to Jesus' call, for the Holy Spirit will fill you and surround you with all that you need to live as a disciple.

It is also important that we remember that the first call that Jesus extended was to follow him to 'fish for people'. And we can all engage in that ministry, no matter what our skills or gifts or qualifications may be. As Francis of Assisi once said, 'Preach the gospel always—when necessary use words.' By attitude and example, we can preach the Christian gospel to all people, reaching out to them just as Jesus did to the first disciples.

Come, let us follow Christ together! Amen.

Mark 1:14-20

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." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.