

## Epiphany 3, Year B

January 25, 2015

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 by 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.*

It's a cold, dreary December morning. The Bank is a bustling place, long lines at each of the three teller windows, with impatient customers anxious to deposit their paychecks or withdraw some of their money so they can get out and do some Christmas shopping. A chill wind blows in as the door opens once again, and a man enters, bundled up in his hooded down coat, stomping his feet on the mat to remove what snow he can from his shoes. He walks up to the front of the line, ignoring the incensed glares of customers waiting behind him, and speaks to the teller in a calm voice: "Follow me". Stopping right in the middle of cashing a check for a short, frumpy-looking man, the teller leaves her post. Astonished customers look on in stunned disbelief as the scene is repeated at the two other windows, until no teller is left in the bank.

A rather far-fetched, unrealistic scenario, wouldn't you agree? Yet is it that different from the situation we find in our Gospel today?

I don't know about you, but I have always been a bit uncomfortable with the account of Jesus calling his first Disciples. It seems so implausible, unimaginable! A man doesn't simply walk up to some fishermen busy at their nets, say, "Follow me" – and they drop everything and follow! Would *you* leave *your* family and vocation at the drop of a hat, not even packing a suitcase, giving two week's notice, kissing your spouse and kids good-bye?

I don't think so.

And so, how is a *rational* person supposed to deal with this story?

Personally, I find that I have three options:

- 1) I may *discount* the story, seeing it as a questionable exaggeration, or as a well-meant fabrication by the Gospel-writer Mark;
- 2) I may *rationalize* the story, making the presumption that surely these disciples had known Jesus for some years, perhaps had already packed their bags and said their goodbyes, and were just waiting for the word to go; or
- 3) I may try to pay attention to what this story is saying to me on a deeper level, beneath its improbable surface.

Now, since discounting Scripture outright is an arrogant response at best, and making the story *sound* more rational by adding my own details is no less presumptuous, the third option seems to

me the most faithful: to try and hear what the text is saying on a level I have not been listening to before.

“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Now “fishing” for most of us in Colorado means putting a dry fly on the end of a line and casting it into a stream. Then, if we’re skilled, lucky, or both, a fish will be lured to the fly and tricked into thinking it’s a real insect. But to the *disciples* – as to many commercial fishermen today – fishing meant throwing a net into the sea, encircling the fish in its relentless grasp. No fake insects; no worms hiding a barbed hook; no attempt to trick or outwit an unsuspecting trout. A net was thrown over the fish, holding them captive to a compelling power drawing them in.

When Jesus says he will make his disciples “fishers of people”, **that** must be the picture which comes to their minds: not an image of luring people in, dangling a tempting prize in front of them, a promise of a secure, comfortable life. Rather, the disciples must envision throwing a net over people, catching them, capturing them. And I think that is what Jesus actually does with the four fishermen in our Gospel story: he somehow throws a strong, Spirit-woven net over them and captures them. He captures them.

Now lest we see that image in too negative a light, we should bear in mind that we also talk about being “captured by love”, or “falling in love”. One author notes: “The relationship of love is often something out of our control. It happens *to* us. When its power runs its full effect, it means a change in life – marriage is as much a dying to the old life as it is the beginning of a new life.” (Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg Commentary Series)

As much a dying to the old life as a beginning of a new life.

And *there’s* the rub, is it not? What is so difficult to accept about this Gospel passage is not so much the unlikelihood that four fishermen would leave their nets at a moment’s notice to follow a stranger. What is *really* difficult – and what frightens us – is coming to grips with what abandoning old attachments in order to follow Jesus would mean for our *own* lives.

And so, when we read this Gospel story, we choose to interpret it using option #1 or #2: We discount the story as a fabrication, or we rationalize it, imagining that Jesus had groomed these fishermen for months or years before he issued his final call. Either way, the story doesn’t apply to you or me. And that’s the way we *like* our Bible stories: out there, at a distance, happening to *other* people, not us.

If today’s Gospel *did* apply to us, we’d be scared. For we are afraid of changing our hearts, our lives – even one small part of our lives – and even *more* afraid of having it changed *for* us! We fear having to give up our comfortable opinions, our familiar habits, our hard-won self-image, our control over our lives. Why, even our very structure of faith can easily become a means of controlling our lives, a defense against having to surrender to God. Author Flannery O’Connor wrote, “Most of us *believe* in order to feel secure, in order to make our individual lives seem valuable and meaningful. *Belief* has thus become an attempt to hang on to life, to grasp and keep it for one’s own. But you **cannot** understand life and its mysteries as long as you try to grasp it. Indeed, you **cannot** grasp it, just as you cannot walk off with a river in a bucket... To have

running water you must let go of it and run. The same is true of life and of God.” (quoted from *The Habit of Being*, emphasis mine)

Let go of it. Abandon our grasping ways and follow Jesus along a path which is at times risky and less than certain because **we** do not always set the agenda. “Come, follow me” does not tell us **where** we are going; it simply says **whom** we are following.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose *own* path of discipleship led him to being executed by Hitler, wrote: “If we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to [Christ], for only He knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ who bids us follow Him, knows the journey’s end. But we **do** know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.” (quoted from *The Cost of Discipleship*)

Discipleship means joy! Perhaps *that* is the perspective that we are **missing** in all of this! We read that the disciples left everything to follow Jesus, and what **we** focus on is what they are giving **up** – their old way of life, their livelihood, their living among their families. We read this account of the call of the First Four and *we are afraid*, because what we see is that they are leaving behind all that is familiar. What we **fail** to see (at least, what **I** have so often failed to see) is what they are giving themselves **to**: a life of meaning, a life of joy, a life drawn up into God’s work and purpose in the world, a life captured by the net of God’s loving sovereignty.

Albert Schweitzer was a renowned theologian, New Testament scholar and author whose research and publications on the historical Jesus were definitive for his time. He was also one of the finest organists in the world, concertizing all over Europe, writing books about Bach, about organ-building, and leading a sweeping renewal of the whole approach to organ music of his time. Then one day he received a magazine, delivered to him by mistake, and opening it to a random page, he read of the great need for medical missionaries in Africa, and he felt a powerful call from God to answer this need, though he did not possess any knowledge of medicine. So he went to medical school, became a doctor, and, giving up his successful careers in music and theology, left the European culture and family he knew to follow this call to Africa. Schweitzer wrote of his own interpretation of today’s Gospel passage in these words:

“He comes to **us** as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to **us** the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for *our* time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship; and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.” (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p.40)

We may chafe at the very idea that *anyone* would throw a net over us; that anyone – even Jesus – would “capture” us. What we fail to realize is that each of us is *already* captive in a tangled net of our own making: captive to our self-centeredness, our attachment to things, desires, ways of thinking, or what have you. Jesus calls, unbinds us from that snarled net, throws his *own* net over us, captures us; and in **his** captivity we are freed.

“Follow me”.

In responding to that call, we may focus on what we are giving *up*, or on what we are giving ourselves *to*: a life of meaning, a life of joy, a life drawn up into God's work and purpose in the world, a life captured by the net of God's loving Spirit.

AMEN