

Follow Me

Meditation on Mark 1:14-20

Jan. 21, 2018

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

The day we went to the aquarium in Boston, 4-year-old Jessie announced that she was going to wear her Wonder Woman costume. No, she was going to BE Wonder Woman. As we put on our shoes and packed the diaper bag, she paced back and forth, asking, “Who can I help?” She was ready to save the world from all evil.

While we waited for the elevator in the hallway of their 4th floor apartment, Wonder Woman practiced flying, arms outstretched, tiny feet pounding the carpet, sound effects spilling out. Wooooooshhhhhh!

“Is my cape going out?” she wanted to know.

“Yes!” we encouraged her. She was surely flying.

In one of the wide sweeps, her gold hat fell off. She bent down and picked it up. Placed it on her dark, curly hair. Ta-daaaaa! Wonder

Woman, again. As her daddy drove us to the aquarium with her baby sister, Maddie, and Grandpa Jim, Wonder Woman, next to me in her car seat, said that I was no longer Grandma Karen. I was Bat Girl. No, Supergirl, she corrected herself. She told me what Super Girl would be wearing, if I had a Supergirl costume. Together, we Superheroines would save the world.

At the New England Aquarium, Jessie saw penguins--diving and splashing in the water, climbing on rocks. She courageously stuck her hand in a tank with stingrays and petted them. She couldn't wait to see the 90-year old giant sea turtle named Myrtle. She kept asking for, "Yertle the turtle."

But Wonder Woman hadn't slept well the night before. Or taken a nap that morning. As the afternoon wore on, she became more and more tired, cranky, and uncooperative. Her daddy gently put her up on his shoulders, and carried baby Maddie, too.

After some rest on her daddy's shoulders, a more subdued Wonder Woman walked out of the aquarium on her own. Supergirl was tired, too, so I lagged behind the stroller, pushed by Grandpa Jim, as we trudged to the car in the cold rain.

The wind lifted Wonder Woman's cape. And for a moment, she appeared to be flying.

She fell fast asleep in the car on the way home.

The fishermen Jesus called to be his disciples will all become weary in their journeys of faith. They will all be tempted to walk away when the going gets tough, when they realize that Jesus means it when he says, in

Mark 8:34: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

But in the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, when he is walking beside the Sea of Galilee, four common fishermen will “immediately” drop their nets. They don’t hesitate to walk away from the only way they know to make a living and provide food for the families. They heed Christ’s call when he beckons, “Follow me.”

No one but the Lord speaks in this passage. I would ask questions. Wouldn’t you? Questions such as, “Where are we going?” “How long will we be gone?” And I might say, “Wait, let me pack my things and say goodbye to my family.” I am sure I would have asked, “What do you mean, ‘fish for people’?”

The NRSV translation makes us think that Jesus is inviting them to change what they are doing. But what he really says is, “I am going to change who you are. You were fishermen. Now, you will be “fishers of men” or “people,” as we say in modern, inclusive language.

Christ’s call to those God has claimed for his salvation and ministry is so compelling, they can’t resist. Why did Christ call fishermen for first disciples? Do you ever wonder that? Why not shepherds? Moses, David, and Jacob were all shepherds that God calls as prophet, king and patriarch. The Old Testament is full of sheep/shepherd metaphors for God and his people. Psalm 23-- “the Lord is my shepherd.” Psalm 100 calls us “the sheep of his pasture.” Psalm 95:7 says, “for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.”

But shepherds wouldn’t fit the metaphor of the mission. Shepherds don’t catch new sheep--that’s sheep stealing! The fishermen will gather

believers that God has chosen to draw nearer to Himself. The harvest isn't with bait and hook--no tricks! Believers will come like schools of fish that swim into the disciples' net.

The Old Testament does use the imagery of fish for people, but it is not a comforting image. Ecclesiastes 9:12 b says, "Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity when it suddenly falls upon them." Isaiah 19:8 is anything but encouraging "Those who fish will mourn; all who cast hooks in the Nile will lament, and those who spread nets on the water will languish." Very few Israelites were fishermen before Jesus' time. And there was only one word in ancient Hebrew for fish, and it sounds like our word, "dog." What we call Jonah's "whale" was actually a great fish: "dag gadol." No fish is mentioned by name in the Old or New Testament.

On the other hand, in the Early Church, the symbol for being a Christian wasn't a cross; it was a fish. The Greek word for fish--ichthus--came to represent Jesus' name. It's an acronym or acrostic. The first letters of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior" spell "ichthus."

The character of fishermen in Christ's time may have been part of the reason for Jesus' choosing of them. They are down to earth, hardworking people, not afraid to get their hands dirty and smell like, well, fish. They don't give up easily, though they become tired, frustrated and discouraged. They spent entire nights fishing and not catching anything at all, as Simon says in Luke 5:5. They are not wealthy, though James' and John's father, Zebedee, didn't rely solely on his sons

for his fishing business; he had “hired hands.” Christ sees riches as a hindrance to serving the Lord, telling his disciples in Mark 10:25, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

The Lord himself was willing to live among the lowly and become one of us, for our salvation. Paul says in the Philippians 2:6-8, Christ was “in the form of God, (but) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

One of my seminary professors, Lee Barrett, writes that John Calvin “popularized this passage as a paradigm of the calling of all Christians.” Calvin thought that Christ purposefully called these four fishermen-- Simon, Andrew, James and John-- “rough mechanics” to show that none of us are called “by virtue of his or her own talents and excellences.” “Like those disciples who misunderstood and failed Jesus at every turn, we too are sinners in need of forgiveness for our multiple betrayals.” However, like them, we have the promise of being transformed by Christ into his followers, though some days, we may feel like 4-year old Wonder Woman, needing to be lifted up on the shoulders of our loving Heavenly Father--when we are weary and our faith grows weak.

Yesterday, 35 people--children, teens and adults-- came to our church workday. Pat Smith, our preschool elder, says, “So much was accomplished!” The annex and kitchen ceilings were painted, as was the

men's bathroom. The Memorial Garden was weeded. At the preschool, a cubby, 6 sets of bookcases, one classroom, 3 and 1/2 bathrooms, and the outside steps were painted. Baseboards were installed and the sandbox got a new shingle roof.

Sterling Smith emailed photos of the workers--smiling, I suspect, not because painting and the other work was really fun, but because they were enjoying fellowship, working together in shared mission for the Lord and His Church. And you know, we do have the promise in Matt. 18:20 that wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in His name, Christ is with us! The Preschool is a great example of a ministry that raises up modern day disciples and equips them to "fish for people." Some of those whose faith is being nourished are as young as my granddaughters. There are blessings when we hear Christ's voice--and immediately, without question or hesitation, answer the call.

"Follow me!"

Let us pray. **Heavenly Father, thank you for choosing us to be Christ's disciples--to hear your voice and answer the call to share your good news. Help us when we are weary or discouraged. Build our faith. Fill us with joy. Let us feel your presence always and stir us to love others as you love us. Lord, transform us, as you promised your first disciples--fishermen-- so that we may be "fishers of people" and enlarge your Kingdom, drawing near. In Christ we pray. Amen.**