

January 21, 2018
3rd Sunday of Epiphany

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Left Behind”

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Mark 1:14-20

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.

“Left Behind”

Mark 1:14-20

My friend Karoline was six months and three weeks pregnant with her first child when she suddenly and unexpectedly went into labor. Needless to say, she wasn't prepared. The childbirth classes she had signed up for hadn't started yet. She had faithfully read *What to Expect When You're Expecting* for each stage of her pregnancy, so she'd learned next to nothing about the final trimester or childbirth, much less about bringing home an infant. She had no diapers, no crib, and no car seat. She woke up one day thinking she had time to spare before embarking on her journey of motherhood. Twelve hours later, ready or not, she was a mother. For Karoline, this event was an **epiphany**, a moment when *life suddenly and drastically changes*.¹

This season of the church year, between January 6, when we celebrate the visit of the magi to the baby Jesus and Lent, when we prepare for Holy Week and Easter, is called the season “after epiphany.” The idea is that during this time we consider what happened *after* God incarnate, in the form of a newborn baby, entered the world – a sudden and drastic event that changed everything. This is a season of stories about such events: the epiphany of the magi who saw a star and understood that something new and monumental was taking place; the epiphany of the shepherds visited by angels and directed to the manger; the epiphany of all the people who heard the preaching of John the Baptist and decided to be baptized; the epiphany of Jesus himself at his own baptism by John, when he claims his identity and begins his ministry. And, today, the **epiphany** of Jesus's first disciples, who leave everything behind and follow him.

In Mark's version, the call of the first disciples is as sudden and unexpected as a premature plunge into parenthood. There is a word in Mark's gospel that occurs over and over again, and it shows up in these six verses not just once but twice: *immediately*. Mark's repeated use of this word 'immediately' gives the impression that, when it comes to the good news of the gospel, there is no time to waste. These men leave behind all of the responsibilities of their everyday lives, including their jobs and their families, to follow a teacher they know next to nothing about.

¹ Karoline Lewis, “The Immediately of Epiphany,” *Dear Working Preacher*, January 18, 2015. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3500>

So in this particular story, “immediately” looks like:

acting first, thinking later
leaving things undone
striking *before* the iron’s hot
leaving people behind
venturing into the unknown

None of the things on that list are things with which I am particularly comfortable, and I find this story about dropping everything to follow Jesus more than a little unbelievable, not to mention irritating. Does it not seem like the height of irresponsibility? How would you feel if one of those men was your co-worker or your husband or father or son or friend?

But remember: Mark, like the other gospel writers, used stories that had been passed down about Jesus to construct a gospel that would serve a particular purpose. For Mark, that purpose is to produce in the reader nothing less than an epiphany – a sudden and unexpected understanding, a whole new way of seeing the world. And Mark hopes that what comes after this epiphany is that the reader, like those first disciples, makes the decision to follow Jesus, which means a drastic change in loyalties and priorities. The thing is, a lot has changed since Mark crafted his gospel. At the risk of stating the obvious, for us to follow Jesus today looks nothing like what happens here, when Jesus strolls past a fishing dock, utters ten words and suddenly has disciples.

Cheryl Strayed is the author of the memoir *Wild*, which tells the story of her journey hiking 1500 miles along the Pacific Crest Trail. She went on this journey as a course-correction of sorts. Since the death of her mother when Cheryl was twenty, she had been on a self-destructive path that eroded her marriage and threatened her life. In the book, she describes the process of undergoing this journey: *There was the first, flip decision to do it, followed by the second, more serious decision to actually do it, and then the long third beginning, composed of weeks of shopping and packing and preparing to do it. There was the quitting my job as a waitress and finalizing my divorce and selling almost everything I owned and saying goodbye to my friends and visiting my mother’s grave one last time. There was the driving across the country from Minneapolis to Portland, and a few days later, catching a flight to Los Angeles and a ride to the town of Mojave and another ride to the place where the Trail crossed a highway .At which point, at long last, there was the actual doing it, followed by the grim realization of **what it meant to do it**, followed*

by the decision to **quit** doing it because doing it was absurd and pointless and ridiculously difficult and far more than I expected it would be . . . And then there was truly doing it.²

Mark makes it sound like the disciples just walked away from everything and everyone in their lives when Jesus came along. But the big decisions in our lives look a lot more like what Strayed describes. Like her, when we look back on such decisions, we can track a process, and often it's one of taking two steps forward and one step back. But, as Strayed (and most of us) have also discovered, finally embarking on the journey is just the beginning. Every journey worth taking – whether it's a journey of marriage or a career or a course of treatment or having children or building a community every journey requires not just an initial decision but also the everyday slog of *following the decision through*.

This truth has occurred to me numerous times this week. My family decided last weekend that, two and half years after putting our beloved first dog to sleep, it was time to get a new dog, and a puppy at that. The planning phase of this decision all forty-eight hours of it was full of excitement: online research, setting up an appointment, dog-proofing the house, and shopping at PetSmart. The days since the puppy came home have certainly had some highlights: we all adore him and are, so far, managing to share responsibilities. But, of course, that's not the full picture. There are the nights where he's woken the whole family up at three in the morning and made it clear he is **not** interested in sleeping. There are the accidents that need cleaning up, and there's the way he wants to play just at the moment you sit down to tackle a task that requires sustained attention, like, say, writing a sermon.

Although today's story makes following Jesus look like a simple, one-time decision, as we read more of this gospel, we see that following Jesus is like most other decisions in life. You can plan for it all you want and once you start, there might be a few breath-taking, life-changing, profoundly moving moments, but mostly it's a hard and often confusing journey, filled with *forks in the road* that have **no signs** indicating which way to go. But this journey of discipleship is filled with something else, too, and this is something that shows up right at the beginning of this story of the first people who decided to follow Jesus. Yes, they

² Quoted in "Following," by Nancy Rockwell on her Progressive Christian blog on patheos.com for January 18, 2015. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/search/following/#4myvjgm3KdYkRUJL.99>

may appear to leave behind everything and everyone familiar; their families, their friends, their relationships. But listen to what Jesus tells them: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” This is not going to be an individual journey; it’s a **communal** one. And, although they don’t know it yet, it is a journey that will totally overturn their understanding of what – and who – constitutes family.

Father Gregory Boyle knew a twenty-three-year-old named Miguel who worked in his gang member rehabilitation ministry. Miguel’s pleasant demeanor was remarkable, especially given that he had been terribly abused and then abandoned by his family of origin. One New Year’s Day he called Boyle to wish him happy New Year. “Miguel, I was thinkin’ of ya – you know, on Christmas. So, whad ya do for Christmas?” “Oh, you know, I was just right here,” he said, meaning in his tiny apartment where he lived alone. “All by yourself?” Boyle asked. “Oh no. I invited homies from the crew, you know, *vatos* like me who didn’t had no place to go for Christmas.” Then he names the five men he had over, and Boyle recognizes that they are all former enemies from rival gangs. “Really,” Boyle said, “that sure was nice of you. What did you do?” “Well,” he said his voice thick with pride “I cooked a turkey.” “Wow, you did? Well, how did you prepare it?” “You know,” he said, “Ghetto-style.” Boyle admitted he wasn’t familiar with that particular recipe. Miguel doesn’t mind sharing. “You just rub it with a gang a’ butter, throw a bunch a’ salt and pepper on it, squeeze a couple of *limones* over it and put it in the oven. It tasted proper.” “Wow, that’s impressive. What else did you have besides the turkey?” “Just that. Just turkey,” Miguel says. “Yeah. The six of us, we just sat there, staring at the oven, waiting for that turkey to be done.”³

When we embark on this journey of following Jesus we sooner or later discover that family is not just defined by our blood relations or the people we live with or even the friends we choose. To follow Jesus is to experience the mind blowing epiphany that our family is nothing less than all of humanity.

Which is why the church is so important.

And I’m not talking about the church as a location or a building or a governing structure. I’m talking about the church in its simplest form: a group of people

³ Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart* (pp. 87-88). Simon & Schuster, Inc. Kindle Edition.

who, somewhere along the way, made a decision to follow Jesus, and to do it, together.

Sometimes the people who come together to form a church are so different that we might wonder what on earth brought them together and what keeps them together. And then a sacred story like the one we heard today reminds us: Jesus did, and Jesus does.

We are here because the decision to follow Jesus can only be lived out in community, with a bunch of people who are our family, whether we would choose them or not.

Each week, we come together and offer each other companionship and support as we live into our commitment to follow Jesus and to put our loyalty to God above anything or anyone else in our lives.

Some weeks, that is really, really hard. Maybe it's hard because we feel like this week we blew it. We were not the disciples we aspire to be. Maybe it's hard because we feel like God is calling our church to do one thing and there are people who are holding us back. Maybe it's hard because we feel like the church is changing too quickly and leaving some people behind. Maybe it's hard because we feel like the world is leaving the church behind as fewer and fewer people seem to show any interest in following Jesus or being part of a church.

All of those fears and anxieties bring us to a fork in the road. From here, we can take the path we see in our culture a path of divisiveness and reactivity and building walls and rejecting outsiders and putting our own interests first. We can follow that path, and it would be totally understandable if we did, and from time to time, let's admit it, we all do. But it appears that the One we follow is leading us down a different trail, one on which we learn to keep not just our doors open, but also our hearts and minds, to treat one another with compassion and grace, trust and respect, to seek to understand those who see things differently than we do *before* passing judgment on them, to see the newest among us as if they are as valuable as those who have been here the longest, to listen with love to those who feel left behind, and to put one foot in front of the other as we continue – *together* – on this journey, trusting – always

trusting – that we follow the One who gathers us together into one human family, the One who will never leave us behind or let us go.
Amen.