

Epiphany 3
January 25, 2009
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Mark 1:14-20

Let us begin today in prayer.

Lord Jesus, give us a teachable spirit, receptive and open to your word, even when your word assaults our sensibilities and challenges us to the core of our being. Give us the means to hear you when you speak, calling our names, calling us to come forward and be part of your Realm. Help us to hear your proclamation as our vocation. Amen.

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Last Sunday we heard the story of Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael. We noticed that, according to the Gospel of John, before Jesus had done any preaching or teaching or miraculous works, he called everyday, ordinary people like us to work with him. Jesus called people to work with him in reconciling the world, just as God charged humankind to work with Him in governing creation.

Today, we turn to the call of the first disciples – Simon Peter & Andrew, James & John – according to the Gospel of Mark. Notice that the timeline of events is a little different here. According to Mark, Jesus' ministry begins after John the Baptist was arrested. Jesus begins his ministry with preaching in Galilee.

It was while in Galilee that Jesus calls his first disciples. The text says,

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.¹

Here’s another one of those instances where this story is supposed to remind us of a story from the Old Testament. It’s very similar to the call of the prophet Elijah to Elisha. Here’s the story:

So Elijah set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.²

By recalling this story, I think Mark is sending us a signal: That Jesus is not simply a teacher calling new students. Mark is telling us that Jesus is a prophet, like Elijah and the other Old Testament prophets, and that this prophet Jesus is calling other people out to be prophets like him.

Throughout all of today's story, there is a sense of urgency. Now after John was arrested," Jesus began his ministry. "Immediately" after Jesus extends his calls to Simon Peter & Andrew, they leave their nets and follow him. And when Jesus sees James & John, he "immediately" calls to them. There is something urgent about this mission.

So all of this begs the question: What are those who are called to be prophets supposed to proclaim? And again Mark answers that question for us, in just the few preceding verses: The disciples of Jesus – those he has called out to be prophets – are to proclaim the very same message he proclaimed. This is the urgent message: That the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.

The first words we hear from Jesus are the very same sorts of words we hear from the Old Testament prophets: repent and return to God. Mark is telling us that Jesus is a prophet, just like the prophets of old. And just like the prophet Elijah, he calls others to follow after him, to be prophets just like him, proclaiming the same message. Jesus tells his new followers, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

Having been fishermen, these men would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about – that they would go out and catch others for Jesus. They would catch others with the gospel message of repentance and forgiveness that Jesus was proclaiming. They would share with others the good news that Jesus was sharing with them.

And so like those first disciples, Jesus calls us out of our everyday lives. He calls us to share with others this message that he has first given us: his loving, his caring, his forgiveness. This is an urgent message for our hurting world.

There is an old legend that I would like to share with you. A devout and generous man died and went to Heaven. Before he allowed St. Peter to usher him through the Pearly Gates he requested that he first take one peak at Hell. At the Gateway of Hell he as astounded to see long tables, laden with sumptuous food. In poured multitudes of gaunt, ghastly people, starved apparently into skeletons. Fastened to the forearm of each were yard-long forks and spoons. They frantically fought to feed themselves, but in vain. It was living Hell. Back in Heaven he beheld banquet tables similarly laden. But when the saints came in, although to each arm was also fastened a yard-long fork and spoon, they sat down and began to feed each other. The new resident knew it was Heaven all right they were all sharing.

A Christian is one who shares with another, who knows how to share because he or she has been sharing the gospel message while they lived their pilgrimage on this earth. Sharing is the call word, the sign that marks the life of a follower of Jesus. Sharing our faith, sharing our resources, sharing a part of ourselves with others is what this life is all about as we follow Jesus.

Stop and think about how these first disciples fished. They didn't use a bait and hook. They cast nets. They cast their nets wide, hoping to catch up as many fish as possible. I think this is a very important lesson for us who are similarly called to "fish" for people. We're supposed to cast a wide net when we share the good news of what Jesus has done for us.

John Mark and I have a friend named Larry. We met Larry when we first arrived at our congregation in Virginia. Larry is a retired Army officer. When we knew him in Virginia, he was working in government contracting. As with so many of us, there were either stringent rules or unwritten societal norms about how much of his faith Larry could share at his job site.

But Larry was a crafty fisherman. While he wore a suit to work every day, he also wore a little Jesus fish lapel pin on his jacket every day. And it was this simple little pin that gave Larry the opportunity to share his faith on many occasions. You see, he knew he couldn't start a conversation at work about sharing his faith, but there was nothing to prevent him from responding to people's questions. Many people saw his fish pin, and after noticing that Larry wore that same pin every day to work, they would ask him what it was and why he wore it. This simple little pin opened many doors of opportunity for Larry to share his faith.

Last week I mentioned to you that I would be offering a special course during Lent. This course, intended to help you discover your own personal faith story, the story of what Jesus has done for you, and then to begin telling others that story, is appropriately named, “Sharing the Faith.” I hope you’ll consider answering the call that Jesus has made to all of us – to be fishers of people – and consider signing up for this course. Sharing is the primary vocation to which all Christians are called, and our faith stories are the number one thing we’re supposed to be sharing.

Amen.

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¹ Mark 1:16-18

² I Kings 19:19-21