

The Call to Follow

Our Scripture lesson this morning begins with the phrase, "After John was put in prison." What this means is that the time for Jesus' unveiling is at hand: "The kingdom of God is near." John's imprisonment marks two things. Remember that I told you last week that John represents the best of the Old Covenant, whereas the appearance of Jesus marks the beginning of the New Covenant. John's imprisonment takes him out of the picture. John himself said of Jesus, "He must increase while I must decrease; thus, John is put aside so Jesus can shine.

The second thing we need to see about John's imprisonment is that it foreshadows the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus, through which God brings salvation to the world. It's time to notice and to respond. "Repent and believe the good news!"

But what does this repenting and believing look like? In short, it means to hear and to heed the call of Jesus to become His followers, which means we will go where He takes us, do what He shows us, and say what He tells us. Repenting and believing are akin to "leaving and cleaving," which are found in reference to what happens when a man meets a woman and they decide to become husband and wife. The Scripture says, "for this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and cleave unto his wife and the two will become one flesh."

This is exactly what we are called to in the commandment to repent and believe the gospel. In its original context, among the Jewish population in which the good news was first proclaimed, this repenting and believing meant turning away from a religion of law and the guilt incurred through law-breaking, and a turning to the journey of grace found in following the risen Christ. Thus, dead religion is replaced with a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. For the Gentile population and for us today, the repenting and believing meant and means turning away from whatever it is that we find ourselves worshiping and trusting for our salvation in place of Him and turning to the journey of grace found in following the risen Christ. What we turn from may be slightly different in each class and in each individual life, because sin is a "shape-shifter"--it takes on many forms and slithers from one form to another to keep us captive--but what we turn to is the same; we turn to Christ, who is the Living Lord.

"Repenting and believing," and "leaving and cleaving," also have a similar end goal. When a man and a woman find each other and marry the goal is to attain a "one flesh," relationship; the two are to become one. When we obey the invitation to repent and believe the good news,

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who is Jesus Christ, and to follow Him, the goal is to become one with Him. Jesus says that just as He and the Father are one, we are to be one. We are to be one with each other and one with Him.

So I tell you all of this to get to the main point: When Jesus calls us to come and follow Him, to repent and believe, it is the same as to leave and to cleave. It means to turn away from everything that is not compatible with Him and to hang on to Him for all we are worth.

We could picture it like this: Suppose you have fallen over the edge of a cliff and you have managed to grab hold of a vine that has given you a temporary stay of execution. And suppose as you are hanging there you notice that the vine you are holding on to is moving. Your weight is slowly but surely pulling it up by its roots. It's possible you reason, that it might yet lodge itself between some rocks and hold, but it's a very precarious situation.

Just then there is a Voice. You can't see who the voice belongs to, but it seems strong and laced with authority. The Voice says "Let go of the vine you are clinging to and grab the one just below." "It will hold you until I can climb down to make your rescue complete." But here's the problem: a vine in hand, even if it doesn't have a very strong root system, seems more comfortable than one yet to be tried. What if the Voice is wrong? What if the second vine proves even weaker than the first one? What if it pulls up as soon as you put your weight on it? Even if the first vine gives you only a few minutes or even a few seconds more to live, aren't those few minutes or seconds too precious to risk? You are torn as to what to do. Will you repent and believe, leave the first vine and cleave to the second one, or will you hang on to the first vine until it's too late? What will you do?

The fishermen whom Jesus found fishing or tending their nets along lake Galilee, would not seem that bad off. They had their profession, their boats and their nets, their homes, their extended families around them, and a religion they had been taught from childhood. Except for the fact that their land was under Roman occupation and that they were struggling under Roman taxation, they didn't have it that bad. But there was something about the look in Jesus' eyes and something in the quiet authority of His voice that they found compelling. They were willing to turn and follow, leave the familiar and cleave to Him and to the new dream He was offering them. They got up out of their boats and began on the journey to discipleship.

Some of you may find yourselves in a similar place. You are not exactly happy with where you are in life; it's not what you had once

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aspired to, or--if it is--it doesn't satisfy you as you thought it would, but it's not that bad either. You know it's a bit of a rut but there's something comforting about being in it. As long as you can keep yourself distracted from the loneliness and the hollowness deep within, what John Eldridge calls "the Haunting), as long as you can keep the shapeless dread at the core of your being in the shadows, you can stand it. As long as you can keep your wits about you it's doable.

But it may also be the case that you have heard His voice. The voice of your innermost being has been relentlessly saying there has to be more and the voice from above agrees: There is more! Repent and believe the good news; there is more. But, you must come and follow Him; you must leave behind what holds you back and cleave to the One who draws you forward. The adventure of a lifetime awaits, even if you've almost finished a lifetime, but you must come and follow Him. **It's time to answer His call.**

What can the one who chooses to answer this call expect to be doing with her or his life? In Mark 1:17, Jesus says "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." There are many ways of making a living in life, and most of them are honorable. There are many professions, many occupations, but for the follower of Jesus there is one overarching mission and one purpose and that is to follow Jesus and to assist Jesus in fishing for people. Jesus came into this world to connect people with God and He calls us to follow Him in doing the same.

Jesus' suffering and death on the cross are often referred to as His passion. He made that sacrifice for the salvation of people. Lost people are His passion. And, guess what? If we follow Jesus and become of one heart with Jesus, lost people will be our passion too. There is no greater calling, no greater sense of fulfillment, no greater joy, no greater purpose than to be used of God to help someone else find the Lord Jesus and come home to God. And, it's not just for preachers; this is the chief work of every follower and disciple of Jesus Christ and the chief work of every Church. **The people of God exist to glorify God by connecting other people with God. We were all born again to fish!**

And, so, as Mark tells the story, the fishermen disciples followed Jesus to Capernaum. Mark 1:21b-27 continue: "and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know

who you are--the Holy One of God!" 'Be quiet!' said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!' The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching--and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.'

We can be sure that the followers of Jesus are born again to be fishers of men, and from verses 21-27 of Mark 1, we can be sure that the followers of Jesus will also face opposition.

There was a story in the news on Thursday about a delivery woman who, upon coming out of an apartment building in State College, had her money bag stolen. A man came out of the bushes, grabbed the money bag and ran off with it. In most cases this would have been the end of the story, but this particular delivery woman had an unexpected amount of spunk. She chased after the thief, ran him down, struggled against him, punched him in the nose, and reclaimed the money bag for her employer. She was not about to let the thief keep something that belonged to her boss.

As followers of Jesus, we find ourselves in a similar situation. The serpent spirit who appeared in the Garden of Eden and conned Adam and Eve into disobeying the Lord, has taken many other people captive. There are thousands of people all around us who wear his chains. They are enslaved by fear, enslaved by anger, enslaved by various and sundry addictions, enslaved by guilt, enslaved by grief, enslaved by the hopelessness of living in our bad news world. But they do not rightfully belong to the enemy. He lied to them and tempted them and they allowed themselves to be conned. He stole their souls just as surely as that thief took the moneybag.

And, do you know what? We ought to be angry about that. Righteous indignation should arise within us every time we see a person who has been stolen, and we should go into battle mode. As children of God, we need to fight for the souls of men. Through tenacious prayer and by the word of our testimonies we need to fight. And when the spirits of evil put up a fuss, which they will, we need to speak to them in the matchless name of Jesus and command them to set free their prisoners. **We were born again to fight for the souls of men.**

As disciples of Jesus we need to follow Him. We need to fish and we need to fight. But there is one more thing in our Scripture lesson today that we need to be prepared for, and that is we need to be prepared to restore.

Mark 1:28-34 say, "News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was."

It's not enough to fish for people and to free them from their devils. The work is not complete until we restore them to usefulness in the kingdom. Our work is not done until the people we have helped free from bondage are also following Jesus on the journey of discipleship. Simon Peter's mother-in-law lay sick in bed with a fever. The enemy was using sickness to keep her from her rightful place of service. Jesus went to her, took her by the hand, and helped her up. Mark tells us that her fever left her and she began to wait on them.

One of the greatest of all the reasons people get sick and fail to recover is that they have lost their purpose for living. The loss of a spouse, the loss of a job, a debilitating injury, the absence of a mission, are windows through which the chill of sickness and death enter. As the followers of Jesus, we need to talk to people about their sense of purpose and help them find in Christ how their gifts and talents, and how their unique and wonderful personalities, can be used to bless others and build the kingdom of God. We are called to pray for one another and to help one another stay active for the Lord. **We are born again to restore life-giving ministry to those who have been sick.**

We are called to repent and believe the gospel; to leave our sin and follow Christ. As His servants we are called to fish for people, fight the enemy for their freedom, and restore them to usefulness in the kingdom. Let us pray for one another as we go out to fish, fight, and seek to restore this coming week.

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Called to Follow

Mark 1:14-34

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