

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

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Mark 1:14–20

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Startle us o God, with your word. Challenge us to see new things and new possibilities. Open our eyes, hearts, and ears so that we may hear from you. That in hearing, we may obey, that obeying, we may serve you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

There are a number of what are known as “call stories” in scripture. Where God, or Jesus, call people into ministry. Our gospel lesson for today, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, shows us another example of calling, when Jesus begins to call forth disciples to partner with him in spreading the good news of God. It is an example of a more immediate response to God’s call. Listen for the word of God.

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 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.

The call of Simon, Andrew, James and John as told in the Gospel of Mark is quick and to the point. Like most of Mark, details are few and far between. Although there are few details, there is a lot going on in these few verses. And while this story is part of a much larger story, these few verses are almost a complete drama in and of themselves.

In drama, or in good story telling, there are different elements that make up the structure of the plot. These elements include exposition, conflict, climax and resolution. Within those four components of dramatic structure there are different elements that make up those four parts. For example, in exposition, that is the information that tells us what we need to know to understand the story, there is what is called the antecedent action – or that which has happened before the story begins, in this case, we are told that John the Baptist has been arrested. Additionally, as part of the exposition and to orient us to the story at hand, Jesus appears in the area and declares “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is near.” Events have happened prior to Jesus calling the first disciples.

After we know what has happened before, and we have received enough exposition to orient us to the story, the drama moves into conflict. The conflict begins with something called the inciting incident, that thing that initiates the conflict and moves the drama forward. In our brief drama, after Jesus’s declaration of the kingdom of God being at hand, he sees the brothers Simon and Andrew, and James and John, and he calls them to follow. This introduces the conflict for these men, should they follow? Do they stay where they are? There is a decision to be made.

The climax, while not necessarily the high point of the story, is the moment in which the story must turn in one direction or another. Within our drama, the inciting incident and the climax are one in the same. Jesus calls, and the climax comes when the men drop what they are doing and make a decision to follow.

There is a sense of immediacy to this drama. Jesus shows up, makes a declaration, and calls these people into a new life, into a new purpose. And we are told in the story that the men respond to this challenge immediately. Again, there is a sense of urgency in the story, time, it seems, is important. At the very beginning of our story Jesus declares the time is fulfilled and then the pair of brothers immediately respond. In fact, in this succinct story we hear the word “immediately” twice. Instead of uncertainty, reluctance, or argument like we see in some other call stories in scripture, we get a sense of urgency and quick obedience here.

Frankly, I like the other call narratives in scripture a little more. This call story makes me a little uneasy because of the immediate response to the call. I find this story a little more difficult to relate to – to see myself in the story. How many of us, really, would be willing to drop everything and follow so quickly. I like those stories of call where there is reluctance, hesitation, argument, confusion, prayerful contemplation, I can relate to that. Immediate obedience, not so much.

There are many people who point to this type of immediate obedience as the purest example of how all of us should respond to God, as if this is the only and true faithful response. But I think it is a little more complicated than that. Some people who like the interpretation of the immediacy of this encounter assume, when reading or hearing this story that this is the very first interaction between these brothers and Jesus. They take this assumption to talk about how amazing the faith of the men is that they are willing to drop everything and follow Jesus at a moment’s notice because Jesus is so compelling and amazing. And while I think that Jesus is compelling and amazing, I find it helpful to know that there are some who suggest that this response is not as immediate as it might appear.

Galilee, where the story takes place, is not a huge city filled with millions of people. Rather, it is a relatively small area, a small town. Perhaps then, some suggest, this is not the first encounter that Simon, Andrew, James, and John have had with Jesus. Perhaps they have heard him teach in the synagogue. Perhaps they have been following John the Baptist and have heard from John about his cousin Jesus. Maybe Jesus has been fishing with these men. Maybe they have sat around the table sharing a meal with one another and heard Jesus talk about the future where the world will be changed. Perhaps the call of Jesus isn't new to these men at all. Perhaps they have been waiting for this moment, waiting for Jesus to say, "now is the time, follow me." Maybe they have been preparing for this moment for a while. We don't really know but it's possible.

I find this possibility helpful. I don't think it takes away all the urgency in the story, but I do find it a way to make the story more relatable. I find it easier to understand and can find my way into the story when I think that perhaps Simon, Andrew, James and John were familiar with Jesus. They have begun to build relationship and trust with Jesus. If I can believe that they had a prior relationship to Jesus then it makes the story a little more plausible for me. Aren't we all more apt or more likely to step out into an unknown future with someone we already have a relationship with as opposed to a stranger?

With this possibility, the challenge of the call is still demanding, after all Jesus asks a lot of his followers, but even in all of its challenge it is a lot more relatable, a lot more believable for me than a sudden conversion and blind obedience. There is a little more grey than the black and white of the immediate obedience. There's a little more room for all call stories, and not an insistence of one particular way. It's more complex than simple, just like our faith.

But I don't want to dismiss the urgency of Jesus' call completely because it's there in the story and it's important. Again, Jesus starts by declaring the time is fulfilled and that the kingdom of God is near. The response to this is that Jesus needs a community around him to help declare and bring the good news to fruition. To follow him and share in his ministry. One writer says, "Jesus and the disciples are active agents in leading people to experience the presence of the kingdom of God. The disciples, in particular, are not passive recipients of God's favor. Jesus called them in order that they might join him in proclaiming the coming of God's reign on earth."ⁱ

This calling by Jesus to be active agents in leading people to experience the presence of the kingdom of God requires us to make choices. Now some siblings in the faith, concentrate so much on this choice, they stress this moment of decision for Jesus so much it's almost as if they see it as the end of the journey, and then fail to nurture the long-term growth and maturity of the disciple. Their sense of urgency for the decision is huge because for them the stakes are so high, it's a matter of life and death. It's a matter of salvation. It deals with eternal things. You must decide on the spot, you must say the right prayer, (cue the alter call and play Just As I Am now) you must give your life to Jesus immediately. This is the climax and the resolution of faith, the decision for Christ. Our brothers and sisters of the faith for whom this resonates, have little problem with the calling of these first disciples and the urgency and immediacy of their response. It's not troubling, it's an aspiration. It's the climax and the resolution of the drama.

I point this understanding out, this urgent decision theology if you will, not because I want to deride it, rather, I admire it. I admire it because of its urgency. I admire it because it does matter a great deal to these folks. I admire it because there is passionate belief, because the stakes are high and it's a life and death matter. I admire it because I wish more people

with a progressive theological understanding had a stronger sense of urgency.

You see, I think the decision to follow Christ matters as well. In fact, I think it's a life and death matter too, I just think that in a different way. I don't think the decision to follow Christ is the climax or the resolution, I think it's the inciting incident in our story with God. It's the thing that starts it all off. Jesus says the reign of God is near, it's at hand. Come, follow me. This is the beginning of the adventure.

The adventure then is to begin to shape ourselves more and more like Jesus so that when people encounter us it is more and more likely that they will have an experience of the kingdom of God. The adventure is to put our faith in action and do our part to help bring about the reign of God. This *is* a matter of life and death, this is urgent, because the world needs a dose of God's kingdom. The world needs a different story, a different narrative to hold on to. The time is at hand, the kingdom is near. Because of this, it matters how we live. There is an urgency to the life that Jesus leads and an urgency into the life in which Jesus calls us. Jesus calls us into a new way of being.

And this new way of being calls us into not just a life, but also into decisions. The life of a disciple is made both of moments and a lifetime. If we are honest, the life of discipleship calls us to make choices; choices to go toward the good, choices to move away from anger and toward kindness, choices to move away from retribution and toward reconciliation, choices to move away from greed and toward generosity, choices away from selfishness toward service, choices away from exclusion toward inclusion, choices away from fear toward hope, choices toward faith, choices toward grace, choices toward justice, toward peace, toward joy, toward forbearance, to gentleness, choices toward love. And not just for us, but for all people.

There is an urgency to our call because the world is in need of the reconciling and restorative love that God provides. The call is urgent because there remain injustices in the world. People still are made poor by unjust systems, unfair wages, and a lack of support. Women do not have control over their own reproductive choices and healthcare. LGBTQIA+ persons are under attack. The world is misused and polluted, and the impacts of climate change are devastating. Racial bias and white supremacy are not just things of the past but have real impacts now. War rages on. The call is urgent. The call is urgent because the more people that practice kindness, forbearance, gentleness, peace, love, and all other good things the more the kingdom comes near, the more people can catch a glimpse of an alternative story, the more people can work for the common good.

After Jesus declares the nearness of the kingdom of God, he also calls on the people to “repent and believe the good news.” We, like Jesus, are to declare to people and invite them into this good news.

My father-in-law, who was raised squarely in the tradition of decision theology, would often joke with me when he would ask me about the task of preaching. He would tell me that it’s rather simple to preach because all that I needed to communicate was a simple message, “Turn or Burn.” As I said, he said this jokingly but there was also an element of truth for him in this. There is that urgency and the high stakes of a life and death matter. I can appreciate that, and I respect the urgency.

Jesus says, “repent and believe in the good news.” Repent does mean to turn but Jesus says, not “Turn or burn” but rather, “turn and believe in the good news.” Jesus’ call, Jesus’ invitation is into good news. The angels say at Christmas, “see I am bringing you good news of great joy that is for all the people.” Jesus then shows up and, in his life, when the

time is ready, shows us what this good news is all about, and invites us to join in on spreading that good news.

While it may be difficult to understand the how and why of this particular story of the calling of the brothers, how could they respond so immediately, why would they be willing to give up so much so easily? Maybe part of the beauty of this story is that we shouldn't get caught up in the how or the why, because simply, they did. Maybe that's the point of most of the call narratives, to have examples of people who respond. Yes, the variety of responses are helpful because maybe we can see a bit of ourselves in the story, but maybe the biggest or most important thing is to see that there is a response and ultimately, no matter the form, a willingness to follow and to share in inviting others into the good news and into action for a more just world.

Jesus calls us to follow him and to participate in sharing the good news. Our response in the individual millions of moments of decision and choices over the lifetime of our faith is part of the story that unfolds before us. This story calls us to make decisions, as much as possible, to turn toward Jesus – to be like Jesus so that people can see and experience the kingdom of God. There is an immediacy to this call. There is an urgency to this call because it matters how we respond when God shows up in our life. This *is* a matter of life and death. Not just your own, but everyone's. My friends, Jesus calls us, Jesus invites us to hear his voice, turn and believe the good news!

Amen.

¹ Leslie J. Hoppe – Feasting on the Word