
WHEN JESUS CALLS

MARK 1:14-20

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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Today, I want to be honest about when Jesus calls, not from his iPhone but to your heart. Most of you are here because Jesus called you at some point and you followed. And to tell the truth, you may not even know why but you're still following. When Jesus calls, it's not always clear or smooth or so carefree that every day you whistle Bobby McFerrin's, "Don't worry be happy." Perhaps, for some, it can be an experience of great ease and clarity. I haven't met anyone for whom that's precisely true. But often, like we heard last Sunday, the call experience may be more like Samuel who couldn't discern that God was calling him. He heard a voice, but he didn't know who was calling.

You can't blame Samuel for that because he was engaged in his regular daily routine and hearing a call was the last thing on his mind. Those who are called are not necessarily listening for a call. You're just living. Going to class. Studying in Perkins library. Working on a lab report. Sending an email. Playing pickleball. Fishing. Casting a net in the sea or mending nets in a boat. When Jesus calls we are often engaged in our quotidian activities. The *context of a call* to follow Jesus is in our everyday life when we are going about our daily work. Jesus calls when we're not expecting it or even wanting it. Simon, Andrew, James and John were not at a monastic retreat center sitting in silence, chanting the Psalms, reading the scriptures or even praying, when Jesus calls them. They were engaging in their usual daily work as typical fisherman of the day. The call comes in the mundane. On a hike by the Eno River. At your remote work office desk at home. Watching a TikTok video. *Not* in a protective vault away from the hustle and bustle of the world. Jesus calls while you're working *in* the world among the smell of Galilee fish or North Carolina catfish or shrimp and grits or BBQ ribs or collard greens or mac-n-cheese or fried okra or cornbread.

I was 9 years old when I heard a call and began to follow Jesus. Jesus passed by my Sunday school class with Sis. Tucker. I didn't know where I was going or what was to come. I only knew as a little boy who I was following. Later in life, as an undergrad at Stanford University, I did what undergrads did—that is, everything! I was minding my business, studying, pulling all-nighters, drinking lots of Mountain Dew, playing intramural sports, singing in choirs and acapella groups, participating in campus ministries, doing what I was supposed to do as a college student. And there came a call to follow Jesus in a different direction from what I was considering. I went to Stanford to work in the computer tech industry to make some money, but instead of money, I got ministry and a music major! When Jesus calls, you learn that you can't out-strategize God.

And let's be honest. When Jesus calls, it is not about comfort and getting what *you* want. The call to follow him is often a challenge. There is no glory in following him, then or now. How could it be when we know how his earthly life ends, symbolized by this communion table? From the very beginning of our gospel reading, we get a clue about the *challenges or costs of the call*. The first thing we hear is that John was arrested or 'handed over' which signals suffering is involved in following Jesus even as Jesus will eventually be 'handed over' to the authorities. John is arrested and eventually beheaded by Herod's entourage. The powers that be don't necessarily like it when you follow Jesus—his message and mission—so they may attempt to destroy you like what happened with Dr. King or Archbishop Oscar Romero. When Jesus calls, we ought to be cautious because there is a cost of discipleship. As we've heard from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "When Christ calls [us], he bids [us] to come and die."

Even Jesus at the beginning of his ministry was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. He was faced with a challenge from the start. This is not Mr. Fred Rogers' Neighborhood. The Gospel of Mark doesn't even include a birth narrative of Jesus and it is very brief on the resurrection. What you get in the gospel of Mark is a heavy focus on the suffering and death of Jesus telling us that this is what happens when you follow him—suffering and struggle, not a vacation at the Ritz Carlton in Aruba. The call of Jesus is not lucrative nor a luxury by any means. It

is a challenge because even when Jesus tells them he'll make them fish for people, it's not an easy task because what fish do you know wants to be caught?

Moreover, Simon and Andrew left their nets when Jesus calls and James and John left their father Zebedee to follow Jesus. When Jesus calls, you have to leave the familiar and known for the unfamiliar and unknown—whether it be tasks, practices or relationships. And it isn't easy to let go of what you're used to because it is safe. But the call of Jesus isn't safe. It is salvific but not safe. The call comes with a requirement of change, of repentance, meaning a 'turn' toward new work, new relationships, new locations, new ways of being, a new life. Commitments shift when you follow Jesus. So to be honest, there is a loss of some kind as you lose some things you once had or did. You lose the life you once lived when you follow Jesus. John lost his earthly life. When Jesus calls, our way of life changes, if you are willing to let go of the life you have for the life Jesus wants to give you. Simon, Andrew, James, and John had to leave some things in order to cleave to a new life. What do you have to leave behind to follow Jesus this year?

Even with these challenges or costs, *when Jesus calls we have a reason to celebrate*. This call contains good news. At the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, we are told, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And when Jesus starts his ministry, we learn that "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." Good news means gospel. *Euangelion*. Glad tidings. Even with the challenges already named, the call contains good news. As Frederick Buechner writes, "The Gospel is bad news before it is good news." We are sinners but loved anyway. We may bleed but we are also bled for. It's good news that God moves through Jesus Christ on our behalf and breaks boundaries to usher in the kingdom of God. My former seminary professor Donald Juell called the baptism of Jesus in the gospel of Mark, "Transgressing Boundaries" because there, the divine presence of God breaks through the barricades of human history by tearing open the heavens, so that in Jesus, walls of all kinds, including the one between God and humankind, can be tore down. That means God is on the loose in the person and ministry of Jesus and where Jesus is, there is the kingdom.

And this good news, the gospel, makes a claim on our lives but in Jesus, we gain our true lives. It's good news that Jesus would even want to call us though he doesn't have to. Fishermen. Professors. Doctors. Teachers. Administrative Assistants. Housekeepers. Research assistants. It's good news, too, that following Jesus is a group effort. These fishermen are called two by two. They're called with others who will be their companions on the way, revealing that you're not alone when following Jesus. You may feel lonely at times but you're never alone. We're together on the way in this spiritual adventure.

And there's even more good news. Being a disciple, a follower of Jesus, is not based on what you say—in this call narrative within the gospel of Mark, only Jesus speaks; those called just get up and follow. The focus, therefore, is on what you do with your body. Your physical action is of significance. How you walk the faith is key and that you follow is primary. It doesn't mean you'll always get it right in word or deed, but you are following and that's critical. You might mess up sometimes but you're still following. Your biblical interpretations or theologies may be faulty in some way but you're still following. You might have said a harsh word to someone and regret that, but you're still following. To follow means you go where Jesus goes and you're not static in your faith. When Jesus calls, it is about embodiment, just as the proclamation of the gospel or good news is more than words and includes action. Jesus came preaching the good news of God not just in words but in deeds.

And look at what Jesus did—how the Word took on flesh—in the gospel of Mark. He heals a man with an unclean spirit and heals Simon's mother-in-law of her fever and cleanses a lonely leper and heals a paralytic and heals a man with a withered hand and stills a storm on a sea and then stills a storm in a man who lived among the tombs with an unclean spirit and stops a woman from hemorrhaging after twelve years of her struggle and heals Jairus' daughter on her deathbed and feeds four and five thousand people and heals the sick like the Syrophenician's daughter and cures a deaf man and makes a blind man in Bethsaida see again and heals a boy being convulsed by a spirit and blesses little children. Jesus is God's good news incarnate, so good that diseased crowds pressed against him to touch him. Look at what Jesus did. Died and on a third day he rose, showing us that

the good news, the gospel, of God will never die and lives forever. And Jesus calls us to follow him in this eternal gospel way.

What a privilege—to not only be given the chance at a life you never imagined but to participate with him in sharing and embodying the good news of God on earth. When Jesus calls, it is a call to get ready for the work of healing and transformation in the world. When Jesus passes by Duke Chapel and calls, I hope you drop everything and follow, even without a strategic plan. To be honest, you'll never be the same.