

**God is Calling
Ann Hatfield
Mark 1: 14-20**

Many years ago, in a small group of acquaintances, someone inquired, “Are you very religious?” Except, the person asking the question phrased it slightly differently: “You aren’t very religious, are you?” he asked. The way he stated the question implied the only appropriate and normal response was “Nope, not me.” The man was searching for a “No, way!” or maybe even a strong “Certainly, not!” – As if the mere thought of being religious was a serious character flaw or even a crime.

This was decades ago, before my ordination and call to Westminster. However, at that time, I was a very active member at another Presbyterian church. Along with my husband, Jim, and our two sons, we attended worship every Sunday. We were involved in Sunday school, outreach, and fellowship events. We made a financial pledge every year to support the ministries of the congregation. I prayed daily, attended a weekly Bible Study class, and was moderating the Board of Deacons. I worshipped God. I loved Jesus. I trusted the Holy Spirit. Overall, I was doing my best to be a faithful Christian.

So, the moment I was asked about being religious, the only honest and appropriate answer for me was “Yes, I am.” Naturally, this was not the anticipated response. If you ever want to terminate a conversation – to silence it completely – just admit you are VERY religious!

Recently, at a New Year’s Day open house, the conversation went something like this:

So, Ann, what do you do for a living?

Well, I’m a Presbyterian minister.

Ah, okay then, um.....How about them Eagles???

To which – of course – I responded with a heartfelt, “Go, Eagles!!!”

Today’s passage challenges us to pose a different question. Instead of asking, “Are you very religious?” this story encourages us to examine our lives a little deeper, to ponder: “Are you following Jesus?”

As Don mentioned last week in his sermon, Mark moves quickly through his gospel account. He drives the story forward, frequently incorporating the word “immediately.” In these seven verses, we hear it twice: Jesus immediately calls them, and they immediately follow.

Typical of a biblical call narrative, Mark lifts up three significant elements: the setting, the summons, and the response.

The setting is Galilee. Jesus did not seek his first followers in a bustling metropolitan center, but rather in a remote village on the Sea of Galilee. In Mark's gospel, the first words Jesus speaks are not to royalty or to religious leaders, but to ordinary people – hardworking laborers, casting and mending fishing nets, day in and day out.

The summons – or the call – is to follow Jesus. Even though John the Baptist is in prison, he has already prepared the way for Jesus to come, proclaiming the good news of God. Mark is clear: the time has come. It is the right moment for Jesus to begin his ministry and to preach the kingdom of God has come near.

The response in this story is immediate. Simon, Andrew, James, and John respond to this radical request on their lives without question, complaint, or negotiation.

What is up with that?!?!?

I don't know about you, but I find their response to *immediately* drop everything and follow Jesus exciting and remarkable, but also a little irritating and intimidating. Maybe, you are like me, and you can relate to this familiar joke:

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Change??? What do you mean change???

It has been three weeks since many of us made New Year's resolutions. According to one statistic, 74% of women and 58% of men begin the year by specifically resolving to change the way they live. However, only a fraction of them actually keeps their resolutions. Identifying behavior to modify in 2018 is much easier than living out those adjustments in our daily lives. Change takes courage, as well as commitment.

Additionally, I have found change takes time. It may not happen immediately. For several years, I wrestled with my call to ordained ministry. God was calling, but I was covering my ears and refusing to acknowledge it. What will people think? How will I ever explain this?

I began to sense God's call to attend seminary in the late 1990's, but it wasn't until 2003 that I finally enrolled in classes. Even then, I attended seminary part time, taking six years to graduate – what some people have called the “eternal plan.”

Gradually, I came to realize my change of vocation was not about me, as much as it was about the One who called me. When I am asked how I went from being a civil engineer to becoming a pastor, there is only one response: GOD. I am standing here only by the transforming power of God's grace in my life.

As we listen to today's call narrative, it is easy to get caught up worrying if we have what it takes to drop everything and immediately follow Jesus. Could we do it? Could we abandon everything to set off after Jesus for places unknown?

But as we take a closer look, this isn't just a story about the ability of four fishermen to leave everything behind. This really is a story about God's desire to call us – to use US – as well as God's ability to transform us into people willing and able to follow Jesus.¹

This past Tuesday evening, in an annual joint meeting of our Session and Board of Deacons, we had the great honor of hearing the faith statements of the incoming ruling elders and deacons. It is a holy privilege to listen to their faith journeys. Hearing all the different statements is extraordinary. Each person describes their Christian beliefs, their love of Jesus, and their experience of God in very, unique ways.

Sometimes these statements are shared with laughter; sometimes they are told through tears. As we listen, there are sacred moments when ALL of us have moist eyes or a lump in our throat. Along with the tears, there also is joy. The Christian life is one of abiding joy – not because of who we are, but because of who God is. Not because we will never go through difficult times and dark valleys in life, but because God promises to be with us through them.

Following Jesus is a call to repent and believe in the good news of God. It means opening our eyes, coming to our senses, and turning our lives around. It is an invitation to be caught up in God's life-giving transformation. It is a call that promises a whole new life – a new identity in Christ. Therefore, we should not be so preoccupied with what we are now, as focused on what God can make of us in the years to come.²

As one biblical scholar put it, "We have some changing to do, some new directions to take; its primary orientation, though, is toward God's future rather than our past. . . [It] is an invitation to trust in a future made possible by the grace of God."³

Jesus calls followers into community, because the kingdom of God is not a solitary endeavor. Every single one of us is equipped for ministry in some way. But – thankfully – not all in the same way! As members with a variety of talents and gifts, we are a stronger, healthier, and truer expression of the body of Christ.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John hear God's call, drop everything, and follow Jesus. But this is just the beginning of the story, because being a faithful disciple of Christ takes both a moment and a lifetime.⁴ Discipleship is a longstanding commitment – a decision that we continue to make throughout our lives, day in and day out.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, 40.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 31.

³ Gary W. Charles, *Feasting on the Gospels*, 23.

⁴ Elton W. Brown, *Feasting on the Word*, 288.

These four fishermen may immediately drop everything, but they also are the disciples who will later deny and disappoint Jesus. Like us, they are ordinary and imperfect. Discipleship sometimes is a journey of one step forward, followed by two steps back.

If we ask people, “Are you very religious?” we receive answers about them – what they do or don’t do. But if we ask, “Are you following Jesus?” we focus our attention – not on ourselves – but on Jesus Christ.

As this congregation enters into a visioning process for the next 3 to 5 years, we do so trusting in a future made possible by the grace of God. Our future is not reliant on the ministry gifts we have – or don’t have. Nor is it dependent upon how quickly we respond. Rather, it is about God who calls us and the One we are called to follow.

The visioning process is going to take time. It will not happen immediately. It also is going to take courage and commitment, because it will bring change. As we listen for God’s call upon our congregation, not everything is going to stay the same. However, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus invites us to stop, listen, turn – or turn again – to follow him.

As we do, we will be led out of our past and into the future God is dreaming for us. God is calling. We are invited to come and follow.

May it be so.
Amen.