

FOLLOWING JESUS

Mark 1:14-20

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Series B)

January 24, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Gospel lesson for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 1, verses 14 through 20. In this gospel lesson, Jesus calls his first disciples to drop what they're doing and follow him. Jesus also calls us to follow him. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 1, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.**”

¹⁶ Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “**Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.**” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The sermon this morning is really based on all three of the lessons. So we'll spend some time with each of them, because they all share a common theme of leaving everything and following Jesus. And we probably need to answer a few questions, especially regarding the epistle lesson.

First, the Old Testament lesson from Jonah 3. You can follow along in your Bible or just thumb back a bit in the bulletin.

Jonah is probably the most famous of the Minor Prophets. The Minor Prophets are the twelve little books that close out the Old Testament. Jonah is probably the most famous because of the miraculous nature of his story. The Word of the LORD came to him, telling him to go to Nineveh and call out against it (1:1). Jonah didn't want to do it, because he hated Nineveh and didn't want the city to repent (4:2), so he got on a ship going in the opposite direction. Instead of just staying in Israel, Jonah chose to flee from the LORD (1:3). He seems to have bought into the ancient superstition that the gods were limited to certain regions. So if he got away from Israel, he could get away from the call of the LORD. But he soon found out that no one can flee from the presence of the LORD (Ps. 139:7-10). Out on the sea, the chaotic sea, “the LORD hurled a great wind ... and there was a mighty tempest” (1:4). It became apparent to Jonah and the sailors that his disobedience was the cause of this great storm, so Jonah told them to throw him overboard. The sailors were hesitant, but eventually they did it, and the sea stopped raging (1:12-15).

Then the LORD sent a great fish to swallow up Jonah, not to destroy him, but to save him. Jonah got the first recorded submarine ride back to land (1:17; 2:10). For three days and three

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nights, Jonah was in the belly of the fish (1:17). In this way, Jonah serves as a “type” of Christ. Remember, we talked about this last week. A “type” is a pattern or a foreshadowing of something greater to come. “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish,” Jesus says, “So will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40). God made the fish give Jonah back. This foreshadowed the resurrection, where the Father made death give Jesus Christ back.

Then, back on land, the Word of the LORD came to Jonah again (3:1). This is the part we read today. And this is another one of the ways in which we see Christ in the Old Testament. Whenever we read that the “Word of the LORD” came to someone, we should understand that Word to be the Son of God. We learn to read the Old Testament this way from John, chapter one, where John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14). John teaches us that “The Word of LORD” in the Old Testament is really the Son of God, whom we now know as Jesus Christ. So when we read in the Old Testament that the Word of the LORD came to someone, we should understand that to mean that the Son of God came to that person. And this isn’t just imposing New Testament doctrine on the Old Testament. But there are hints of this in the Old Testament as well. This passage from Jonah is a good example of this. When the Word of the LORD came to Jonah, it doesn’t say that the LORD spoke to Jonah. But it actually says that the Word of the LORD spoke to Jonah. It assigns personal activity to the Word of the LORD. This hints at what John declares plainly, that the Word of the LORD is not just sound waves in the air or letters on a scroll, but a person, the Son of God.

So the Son of God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. And it’s kind of interesting, Jonah’s message is pure Law. There’s no gospel in it. He says, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:4). This is the message Jesus gave him to preach. And these are the only words of Jonah recorded in Nineveh. This doesn’t necessarily mean that this is the only thing Jonah said, just walking around repeating the same sentence over and over again. It could be, but it could also be a summary of his preaching. In the gospel lesson today we see an example of this, where the preaching of Jesus’ entire ministry is summarized in one sentence. So these words in Jonah may be a summary of Jonah’s preaching, or it may be the only thing he said. Either way, the message is simple, and it is pure Law. There is no promise of the Gospel, and there is no call to repentance. The idea for repentance actually comes from the king. He commands the people to turn from evil and violence (3:8). And then, with apparent uncertainty, he says, “Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish” (3:9). So Jonah, apparently, made no promise of forgiveness, nor even command them to repent.

But the people believed his word of judgment. Now this doesn’t mean they came to a saving knowledge of God. It kind of seems like they didn’t. Jonah preached no gospel to them, and the people of Nineveh do not use the personal name of the LORD, Yahweh. They still use the generic word, “God.” So it doesn’t seem like they come to know the LORD as their Savior, but they agree that their evil and violence has reached a critical level where God would be just to wipe out their city.

This is easy to see when we consider just how wicked the city of Nineveh was. Nineveh was the capitol of Assyria. And Assyria may have been the most violent and cruel civilization in the ancient world. They did awful, unspeakable things to the nations they conquered. I kind of want to give you a gory example, but it’s not exactly PG, so I’ll give you a lesser example. One of the sinister, but not necessarily violent practices they had, was that when they conquered a nation, they would export many of the residents to other nations they had conquered, and they would

import residents from those various nations. They did this to create a melting pot, so that the inhabitants of a nation would lose their cultural identity and, along with it, the will to rebel and fight for their freedom.

So Jonah kind of had good reasons to hate Nineveh. He wasn't alone in thinking the world would be better without them. Nineveh was extraordinarily wicked, and they knew it. So Jonah's message of destruction made sense to them. Most importantly, the king believed it. I suppose he thought to himself, *Yeah, we probably deserve to be destroyed. Maybe if we turn away from this evil God will relent.* So they turned in order to preserve their city.

And God did relent from disaster, but Nineveh's law-based repentance was short lived. About seventy years after Jonah's preaching tour, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and did all the mean things they had done to other nations. And eventually, in 612 BC, about 180 years after Jonah's preaching tour, Nineveh is completely destroyed.

But their destruction is delayed for 180 years because they believed the word Jonah preached to them. Jonah, despite his objections, followed the Word of the LORD, that is, he followed Jesus, and the Word of the LORD worked repentance for Nineveh. So this is how the passage from Jonah fits into the theme for today. Jonah followed Jesus by, eventually, obeying the Word of the LORD. It took sacrifice. He had to set aside his hatred for Nineveh. He followed the Word of the LORD, and the Word of the LORD worked repentance.

Now for the epistle lesson from 1 Corinthians 7(:29-35). As we were reading the epistle lesson earlier, if you didn't think to yourself, *What in the world?* you probably weren't paying attention. Paul says, "Let those who have wives live as though they had none" (7:29). That sounds kind of weird. If we read that without some context, we could draw some really bad conclusions. Should a husband completely act as if he's not married? Should he completely ignore his wife, act like she doesn't exist, and go on dates with other women? If you read the rest of the chapter, you will see that Paul certainly does not mean that.

Rather, since the appointed time has grown short—and what Paul means by that is that Christ's return and the end of this age is immanent—since the appointed time has grown short, there is an urgency to the preaching of the Gospel. Marriage, as important and godly as it is, is not necessarily the most important thing in the world. The proclamation of the Gospel is the most essential activity. God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). And in order for this to happen, there need to be preachers. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Being married demands a great deal of attention to your spouse and children. Paul does not forbid marriage, and he commands people who are married to stay married (7:27-28). But Paul commends singleness so that a person can devote their attention to "the things of the Lord" (7:32, 34). He does not commend singleness so that a person can follow their own passions. That's just selfish, and it is better to marry (7:36). But he commends a way of life that few people choose: singleness, so that you can devote your full attention to "the things of the Lord." It's akin to Jesus saying, "**Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me**" (Matt. 10:37-38).

So this is how the epistle lesson fits into the theme of the day. Jesus calls us to follow him as our first priority. We each have several vocations. That is, there are several stations in life that we are called to. You may be children or parents, husbands or wives, grandparents, students, employees, employers, neighbors, citizens, and all sorts of things. And God gives us various

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commands of how to live in these vocations. But the most important vocation is to be a disciple of Jesus. So it's not a call to abandon our other callings. Those are good callings, and they are callings from God. But we must regard discipleship as our first calling.

This is also what we see in the gospel lesson. This occurs at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. He basically picks up where John the Baptist left off. John was arrested because he spoke out against King Herod taking his brother's wife (6:17-18). But then Jesus comes preaching the same thing John had preached. Mark summarizes the teaching of Jesus in one sentence, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"** (1:15). Mark doesn't record quite as much as some of the other gospels, but if we look in Matthew, we see John's preaching and Jesus' preaching summarized in the exact same words (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). They both proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom of God, and they called all people to repentance. The difference, of course, is that John did it as the forerunner, announcing the arrival of the king, while Jesus did it as the king who had arrived.

Then Jesus called his first four disciples: Simon, whom Jesus called "Peter" (John 1:42), along with his brother Andrew, and James and John, who were also brothers. All four of these men were fishermen. And we learn from Luke that these two sets of brothers were actually partners (Luke 5:10). Jesus calls them to leave their fishing business and follow him. And they do it.

At first, it kind of seems like Jesus just walks up to some random strangers, commands them to follow, and they do it. But that's not really how it went, and Mark doesn't say that's how it went.

We know that Simon and Andrew, at least, had already met Jesus. I would guess that since James and John were partners with Simon and Andrew, that they had met Jesus too. Andrew had been a disciple of John the Baptist, who introduced Andrew to Jesus (John 1:40). Then Andrew introduced his brother Simon to Jesus (John 1:41-42). Those introductions took place before John was arrested. So they already know Jesus, and they know him to be the one John the Baptist had been preaching about.

So this meeting, where Jesus calls them out of their fishing boats, isn't their first meeting. Rather, as Jesus begins his public ministry, this is the moment where he calls them to drop what they're doing and devote themselves to public ministry.

Now Jesus does not call every Christian to follow in this same exact way. He does call some of us to devote ourselves to public ministry. And every Christian man should at least consider this possibility. But for most of us, he calls us to follow him by devoting ourselves to the stations of life God has placed us in. He calls us to follow him by being faithful and honest farmers, teachers, nurses, plumbers, pilots, students, painters, construction workers, engineers, mechanics, truck drivers, accountants, salespeople, police officers, and so on. In every professional vocation, we follow Jesus by being faithful and honest. And of course, we do the same as parents, grandparents, children, and siblings. We obey God's call by loving our neighbors in these stations of life. **"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men"** (Col. 3:23).

But for Simon, Andrew, James, and John, Jesus called them to follow him in public ministry. And he made this promise to them: **"I will make you become fishers of men"** (1:17). Jesus wasn't merely saying that they would try to catch men. That's my experience with fishing. It's a lot of fishing, but not a lot of catching. Jesus promises that they will catch men (Luke 5:10). They will preach the Gospel, and people will believe it and be saved. Jesus promises to bless their work. This was a promise *to* them, but it is really a promise *for* us. What I mean is, Simon,

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Andrew, James, and John were not the ones who benefited the most from Jesus' promise. It was those who heard and believed the message. This includes you and me, two thousand years later. The same message they proclaimed then has been proclaimed to us. That is why we are Christians. So we praise God for bringing this message through the ages to us, so that we might believe and be saved. This is how these first disciples followed Jesus. And Jesus calls all of us to follow him in many different vocations.

And we, of course, fail in all of these vocations. We are not as faithful or honest as God commands us to be. We are not as loving as we should be. We sin against the people God has placed around us, and in this way, we also sin against God. We do not follow as faithfully as we should.

This is where we consider that following Jesus is not merely a matter of doing what he says. The command, "Follow me," is literally, "Come after me" (Δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου). Think of it that way. We come after Jesus to all the places he has gone. You remember the game "Follow the Leader"? I remember playing it as a kid. You had to follow the leader and do all the things the leader did. And the leader would try to do hard things in order to get the followers out, like jumping over a fence or balancing on a log across a creek. Jesus went to some very hard places, like the cross, but it's not like a game of follow the leader. That would make following Jesus a test. But it's not a test. It's a gift. So it's more like a shepherd leading his sheep through danger. Jesus, our leader, goes in front, not to set a difficult course for us, but to clear the danger. He goes to the cross before us in order to clear the punishment for sin. Then in Baptism we follow him to the cross. Baptism unites us to Jesus in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). That's how we follow Jesus to the cross. And Jesus goes to the grave before us to sanctify it as a resting place, not as a permanent end. And Jesus rises from the grave and ascends into heaven to open the gates of heaven for us. And he is returning again to take us into the new creation.

To follow Jesus means that we learn from him, we obey him, and we follow him to all the places he goes. By atoning for our sin, he has cleared the way for us to come after him. Sin and death cannot block us from entering into his kingdom. The devil has lost his accusation. When Jesus calls us to follow him, it's not merely a command to live in obedience to him. It is that, but it's more than that. It is an invitation and promise that he will lead us through death and into his new creation. In this new creation we will live with him forever and share in his infinite glory.

Jesus calls you to follow him. He calls you to come and die with him. He calls you to live with him. Follow Jesus today and forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.