

Sermon – January 24, 2021
“They left ... and followed him.”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Mark 1:14-20

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning and welcome to everyone here and to those joining us on line. I trust that you have had a blessed week. Let me share some of the blessings that have occurred on our Charge this past week. The Afton Bible study continues to be a blessing as we encounter Jesus through John’s gospel. We have tarried with the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well for a couple of weeks and have been blessed by our time there. At Fairfield, we were blessed with another talk from Sandra Richter about what it means to be God’s covenant people. Her teaching for me and others pulled many aspects of covenant words found in the Old and New Testaments together into a cohesive picture of what it means to be people in covenant with God. This week we were also blessed to have a time of sharing and prayer for people during the Afton contact and prayer group meeting. I would like to praise God for these and many other moments of His presence through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit in the life of our Charge this past week.

Let’s look at this morning’s scripture and see what astonishments God’s word holds for us today. We should notice that it is after John’s arrest that Jesus begins his work in Galilee. Jesus comes to Galilee from the wilderness following a time of testing by Satan. Unlike Israel, whose willingness to keep God’s word failed in the wilderness, Jesus has been victorious over Satan’s temptations in his wilderness encounter. Jesus has been tempted, but has victoriously clung to God and God’s will for him.

Jesus has come to the region of Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. Jesus is moving about and preaching the good news in this area. His message is that the time is fulfilled. This idea of fulfillment has with it the coming of the end of time, the coming of the time of judgement. We should not lose sight of this idea that with Jesus’ arrival and the start of his ministry the end of all things has begun. The next chapter in God’s plan, following Jesus’

ministry, is the final chapter, judgement. We as the church have often lost this idea that there is yet one more movement of God that is still to come. That movement is the return of Jesus in final judgement. But for now, Jesus' message is first that the time is fulfilled. All things in God's plan are coming to their climax and Jesus begins his ministry.

Jesus' proclamation also includes that the Kingdom of God has come near and that we are to repent and believe this good news. God has again entered into the history of humanity and is acting. If Jesus is God's Son, as he has said he is, then the Kingdom of God is at hand. It is close enough for those in Galilee to touch. No longer do the prophecies about God's plan for salvation point to some distant time, Jesus' proclamation is that now is the time. Like John the Baptist, Jesus also calls for repentance, or a turning to God. But Jesus' call goes further than water baptism for forgiveness. Jesus' call is to believe this good news, that God is acting now. Jesus' proclamation is not for preparation for God's action but to believe it has begun.

Notice Jesus is walking along the seashore in Galilee, most likely in the early predawn hour, as the fishermen are either still fishing or beginning to tend their nets from a time of overnight fishing. As Jesus walks along, he sees Simon and Andrew at work, fishing. Their day has no plan for this encounter with Jesus. They are still seeking to complete their work. Jesus sees them among all of those at work on the shore this morning. Jesus stands on the seashore and calls to them, telling them to "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." This is not a prophet's call to a people. The prophets called people to return to God. This is not an honored call to come and study the Torah with a learned teacher, a Rabbi. Rabbis invited students, or more likely accepted students who came to them, to be taught the Law, the Torah. Jesus' call is different, radically different. His call is to follow him. There is no implication in this call of studying the Torah. It is a call with great authority. It is a call from the Son of God to simple fishermen with no preparations for such a journey. It is a call to something new, something that begins at the fulfilment of time. A call to follow Jesus.

Simon and Andrew immediately follow Jesus. They leave behind their nets, their former lives, and follow Jesus. There is no discussion if they should go, no prayers to see if this is God's will, no seeking of permission, no arranging for care for earthly things. They simply respond to Jesus' call to them and follow him. They give no thought to the cost, nor the plan for their journey. They leave their nets and step into something new, following Jesus.

A little way down the shore, Jesus stops on the seashore again, and this time sees James and John. They are in the boat with their father Zebedee and those who work on the water with them. They have stopped fishing and are now cleaning up from a night of fishing. They are repairing their nets, retying the broken strands of cloth that make up a net. Jesus calls them to follow him as well, and, like Simon and Andrew, they leave behind their vocation and all that it requires, leaving their father, boat, and other workers to follow Jesus. It is the same call, not a call to study the Torah with a famous Rabbi, but to follow Jesus, the Son of God. They do not hesitate to leave their father, the patriarch of the family, nor the family business and all they know to follow Jesus. There is no indication of a goodbye or shalom exchanged with their earthly father, just an immediate response to Jesus' call to them. They leave all to go and follow Jesus.

I ask myself when I read these words of Jesus calling his first disciples, "Why did they follow Jesus? Were they tired of the day-to-day grind of fishing and wanted to do something new?" In Mark's gospel there is no indication that they know Jesus, yet in the other gospels, we find evidence that they have met Jesus and know something of him. We find in those sources evidence that there is some exposure that has gone before that has prepared their hearts to respond to Jesus, so perhaps they were already thinking of following Jesus, wondering about what that would mean if they had the opportunity. I also wonder, "What does Jesus see when he looks at these plain, untrained fishermen that makes him realize they are the ones to call to follow him? How does he know they are the ones among many who will follow him no matter the cost? What did he see in them that let him know these men would become part of a new community and follow him no matter the cost?" And finally, I wonder, "Does Jesus yet stand on the seashore and call today to all people to come and follow him?"

I do not have a solid answer as to why these fishermen left their families, friends, and possessions, and followed Jesus. Maybe it was the authority in his call, the manner in which he spoke. Maybe it was the allure of something new happening in this distant, quiet place that drew them to leave what they knew and follow Jesus. It makes no sense to me other than there is more occurring in this moment of call than I can grasp. I think that God is doing more through Jesus than I am able to recognize. What Jesus saw in their hearts that would allow them to be transformed by following him as disciples, the first in a new community, I cannot answer. These

were devout Jews, responding to a call from a Jew, but they had no unique preparation to go with Jesus. They simply trusted Jesus and followed when he called.

What I do know is that Jesus still stands on the seashore today and calls simple, unprepared people to follow him. I know that because in my life I can find his call to follow him again and again into new places and new experiences, into new communities, into new relationships, and new depths of transformation. I know that Jesus walks the seashore today and sees those no one else sees and calls them to come and follow him into the Kingdom of God.

We are a community called out of the world to follow Jesus who is living in the world. We are those whom I hope and pray have heard Jesus' call to repent and follow him. We are a community of those who have believed the good news and have decided to follow Jesus. Like these disciples, I can find the evidence of God at work in my life preparing me through preparing grace, or as John Wesley called it prevenient grace, grace I received that led me to saving faith in the cross and saving faith itself. For me, the first call of Jesus to follow him was to accept the good news and believe that he had died for my sins. It is a call to be separated from my sin, a call to leave behind my sin nature, a call to follow Jesus into transformation and to be consecrated to God's service. This is justifying grace that Jesus offers through his suffering and death on the cross to me and all who hear his call and believe. This is the first call and if there are any present or hearing my words who have not responded to this call from Jesus, let me encourage you now, today, to surrender to that call, believe this good news, leave behind all that clings to us, and begin to follow Jesus. Our answer to this first call brings justifying grace that offers each of us a righteousness not our own. This is the grace that erases guilt through forgiveness. If you are hearing this first call from Jesus, then come and follow him into the Kingdom of God. We should realize that Jesus is calling fishermen here in this scripture. Fishermen in the Old Testament are associated with judgement. Here, as Jesus begins to call his disciples, the first he calls are fishermen. This connection to the Old Testament should serve as a reminder to us that judgement is coming, time is short. If you hear Jesus' call, answer it now for tomorrow may be too late.

Understand that when we accept this call, we are also receiving sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace is grace that enables our free will to cooperate and respond to the Spirit of God allowing us to follow Jesus into the Kingdom of God and, as we follow, to be transformed. Sanctifying grace works with our free will to enable growth in righteousness and holiness before

God. This journey we follow Jesus into is a journey to holiness. Everyone who has joined this new community by accepting the call to follow Jesus has also received sanctifying grace. We are to become a community that is holy, even as God is holy. Sanctifying grace is the grace that changes our hearts and removes the causes of guilt by remaking us into the image of Jesus. Justifying grace is a finished work by Jesus Christ on the cross. Sanctifying grace is an ongoing, continuing grace that enters into our struggle with our sin nature, and through the power of the Holy Spirit within and around us, brings forth our cooperative response with God's Spirit. Sanctifying grace enables, encourages, and changes us, allowing us to work out our salvation while God is working in us to reform us in accordance with his good pleasure. Sanctification is an ongoing, messy process that we are engaged in all of our lives. Those who have received sanctifying grace are those who are following Jesus, and as we follow, we are those who are growing into his image. Justification, or justifying grace, opens the door and allows us to engage sanctifying grace, a grace that leads us as we are faithful into a fuller response of holiness in our lives. We are not those who stop growing at the moment we answer the call of Jesus and believe. We do not stop at the seashore in our journey, but are those called into a lifetime of following Jesus through the gift of sanctifying grace. This grace is God's steadfast love poured into us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

For those who have heard Jesus' first call from the seashore and have responded, believed in him, and are seeking to follow him, let me ask, "How are we doing?" This is no easy walk. It will not be an easy journey for these fishermen who left everything to follow Jesus and is it not an easy journey for us today. This is a call out of the world to live differently in the world. It is a daily call to holiness. It is a willingness at the end of the day to confess where we have fallen short and to start the new day with the hope that comes from sanctifying grace that we will be strengthened by Jesus to grow as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit. It is a life where, when we fall, we get back up in the power of the Holy Spirit, filled with sanctifying grace, and follow Jesus again. The world holds trials for us. We will be knocked down, flattened, overcome. But as those who follow Jesus, we rise again to follow him to be transformed into his image. Sanctification is neither instantaneous nor linear. It is a messy progression where often we do not see success but seem to be sliding backward into behaviors and sin that we had thought were overcome long ago. This call to holiness is a daily call from Jesus to us, a daily call to start again and to seek to listen for Jesus' call from the seashore and to follow him again in hope each day,

each moment of our lives. Our call today is often heard as we engage God's word in the Bible and seek to listen there for Jesus' call to us each day through the scriptures. Sanctification comes as we seek God in prayer. Sanctification comes as we serve each other. Sanctification comes as we come together in small groups to love each other and lift each other up and call each other into a deeper relationship with God. It is the continuous interaction of a community of believers who are seeking to be the body of Jesus Christ in this community where we have been gathered. Let me remind us of a first step we can take to help us as we seek holiness. Spend an hour a week worshiping God, spend an hour a week learning and studying about Jesus and God, and then spend an hour a week loving others, developing relationships where the love of Christ can flow from us to others and from others to us. This is but a starting point and we should be seeking to grow beyond a start into a people of God who are following Jesus with all of our heart, soul, and mind. Let me close this morning with a reminder to us of words we repeated together a few weeks ago. They are the words from John Wesley's prayer for a covenant relationship with God. Listen again to the words of that prayer: "Let me be your servant, under your command. I will no longer be my own. I will give up myself to your will in all things. Be satisfied that Christ shall give you your place and work. Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal." Try starting your day with that prayer, and then listen for Jesus' call to you from the seashore. And when you hear his voice, leave behind everything and follow him anew.

Pray with me: Lord, as we worship this morning, look upon us, see us, and then let us hear your call to us from the seashore again in a new way. Give us clean hearts and a fresh outpouring of your sanctifying grace to enable us to follow you into holiness. Lord, give us willing hearts to again set aside that which occupies us and instead forsake all and follow you. Amen