



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 3 (B)

How It Works

[RCL] Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

“Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

That’s all we get in today’s Gospel lesson to describe how Jesus called his first disciples and how they responded. That’s it. In just seven verses our Gospel writer says four fishermen drop everything and follow Jesus on the basis of his two-word command: Follow me.

Mark, our Gospel writer, is known for his terse, staccato style. In his telling of the Good News, he shows us a Jesus on the move, Jesus who does everything immediately. (The word “immediately” occurs twice in today’s little story. It occurs about 27 times in the whole Gospel.) Mark gives us just the details we need, and the result is a fast-paced, streamlined account of who Jesus is, what Jesus does, and how people respond.

So, it’s no wonder that today we hear Jesus give a command, and these four fishermen respond immediately.

For some of us, the lack of details is frustrating. We want to know: What were they thinking? What motivated the fishermen? How could they really drop everything to follow?

For others, the lack of details is inviting—our imaginations fill in the gaps. Perhaps Simon was bored that day. The nets had been coming up empty, the wind was too strong to go out far from shore, so why not just leave the nets and follow this man who seemed to need him for something? Perhaps James never really felt like he was cut out for fishing. It was the family business, so of course, he was doing what was expected of him, but really, maybe it was time he stood up for himself and told his father he wanted to try something new, put down the nets, and do his own thing for a change. And Andrew, perhaps he saw something in Jesus’s face when he spoke that intrigued him. Maybe.

We are not told. Apparently, the Gospel writer doesn’t think it matters what they were thinking or feeling. What matters is that Jesus said, “Follow me,” and that’s what they did. We may wish there were more to it than that. We may wish we knew what it was about them that made them so willing to take risks, so free to

respond, so able to walk away from the familiar, from the security of the predictable to go off into an unknown future with a man they hardly knew. But we don't know.

And because Mark doesn't tell us, we have to entertain the possibility that Mark is saying that this really is the way Jesus gets followed: without all the facts, without really knowing what Jesus is up to or where exactly he's going, or why he wants us to follow him. Jesus says, "Follow me," and that's enough. Jesus says, "Follow me," and we do.

Or we don't. Whether we think that Jesus is calling us to undertake even just one task, become more like him in one small way, give up one familiar habit to do something he wants us to do, let alone if following Jesus might mean making large sacrifices, large changes, life-altering plans, it's hard for us to conceive of the possibility of following on the basis of a simple command. *We are not uncomplicated fishermen*, we say, as if any human life is uncomplicated. *We are responsible people*, we say. *We must make our decisions carefully*, we say, *weigh our options. Our decisions take research; our values need clarification. We can't just rush into things. We can't afford to change the directions of our lives merely on the basis of a very vague proposal, let alone just because Jesus tells us to. Really, it would be easier to follow Jesus if we had a different job, a different spouse, if we were single, if we didn't have children, if we had different friends, a different income.*

Discerning the call to follow can be tricky because part of what we try to figure out is when Jesus is calling us to *come away from* the specifics of our lives in order to follow, and when Jesus is calling us *because of* the specifics of our lives, that is, because we have the job we have, because we are who we are. Jesus told those fishermen, "I will make you fish for people." He didn't say, "I really need accountants, but you'll have to do." It may be that he's saying to you, "I really need you to follow me in your job." "I really need you to follow me in your marriage." "I really need you to conform your family life to a way that allows you to follow me." "I really need you to follow me when you're with your friends." "I really need you to use your talents to help in my kingdom, to help in my church, to help in my world."

Today's story is a little unnerving, a little unsettling. Mark seems to be saying that whether we follow by making big changes or small, following means giving things up, just like that. Mark seems to be saying this is how one follows Jesus: without all the details, without taking time to consider all the options, without having much of a road map, beyond putting one foot in front of the other and seeing where Jesus takes you. Can we do it?

Today's gospel story is about a decisive moment in the lives of four fishermen, when Jesus called them to follow and they said yes. But even after they said yes, they had to keep listening. Jesus kept calling them to the next thing, the next way for them to follow. Same with us: we are called again and again to follow, to put aside what's occupying us, and be about Jesus' business instead.

Since it's Jesus who calls us to follow—whether it's to go halfway around the world or to do one thing for Jesus today right where we live, trust this: Jesus won't lead us astray or abandon us. God has given the Church, including this particular church, the gift of the Scriptures, the story of Jesus and the Christian

community, to form us and guide us. God has given us the sacraments and God's promise to be with us and nourish us for God's service in the bread and wine we share together. God has given us the promise to be with us even when just two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ. All these things make our willingness to follow not just about risk, but about promise as well.

When Jesus called those first four fishermen, they didn't make demands and they didn't ask for guarantees, they just left their nets and followed. But later in the gospel, when maybe they were rethinking their decision, Jesus gives them a promise. What happens is this: Simon Peter said to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:28-30).

Today Jesus says to each of us, "Follow me."

What do you say?

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