

“DO YOU WANT TO GO FISHING”

Rev. Becky Stephens

Text: Mark 1:14-20 (NLT)

God’s Word: Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (NLT)

Mark 1:14-20 (NLT)

¹⁴ Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God’s Good News.

¹⁵ “The time promised by God has come at last!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”

¹⁶ One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. ¹⁷ Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” ¹⁸ And they left their nets at once and followed him.

¹⁹ A little farther up the shore Jesus saw Zebedee’s sons, James and John, in a boat repairing their nets. ²⁰ He called them at once, and they also followed him, leaving their father, Zebedee, in the boat with the hired men.

I want us to get a sense of the experience of these fishermen on the day Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee and summoned them to follow him. So we are going to take a minute and use our imaginations. So, however you use your imagination best, prepare yourself to do that now; whether it’s closing your eyes, or looking out the windows, or whatever, get yourself in that mindset for a moment, and imagine with me...

It’s a normal day. You said goodbye to your family after breakfast and headed out the door for what you expected to be a typical workday. Maybe things are extra busy, but you’re doing what you’re paid to do; whether it’s teaching, or doctoring, or selling, or accounting, or whatever. You might even be looking forward to collecting your paycheck at the end of the day; perhaps you have a little something special in mind for your family, dinner and a movie or a brief weekend getaway. In any case, as you work away, you hardly notice the stranger walking by. Until you hear him call out, “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to work for people.”

What are you feeling? Do you look at this stranger with astonishment? Do you wonder what he’s doing and if he’s even talking to you? Then he looks you straight in the eye and says it again, “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to work for people.”

That’s it. You stop what you’re doing, put down your work, and walk away to follow this person who has just unexpectedly stepped into your life. And you don’t turn back. You don’t give another thought to that paycheck. You don’t instruct the stranger to wait while you go and say farewell to

your family. Nothing. You walk away to begin a new life, and you know there is no looking back. This is it.

Can you imagine ever doing such a thing? It would be nearly impossible for us to just walk away from our lives today. There's too much at stake; too many people depend on us. And that's without even taking into consideration the "stranger danger." We are suspicious of every stranger to at least some degree. We would no more take to giving up our livelihood and following a stranger than we would swallow a big gulp of antifreeze.

And yet, that's exactly what those first disciples did. In a single day, Jesus took a walk along the Sea of Galilee and recruited four followers. These were men who had awakened that morning with no idea that the day would hold anything unusual. They ate breakfast in their homes, said farewell to their families, and walked out the door, fully expecting to join them again with a few fish for dinner that night. But then this guy comes along...

You know, in the time of Jesus, fish was a major staple of the Middle Eastern diet. The great Jewish historian, Josephus, reported that on any given day, there were around 330 boats fishing on the Sea of Galilee. And the Sea of Galilee isn't that large at about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. Compare that to Indian Lake, which is a little over 8 square miles. The Sea of Galilee is approximately 64 square miles. So imagine a little over 8 Indian Lakes side by side to make up the Sea of Galilee.

In any case, 330 boats fishing in the Sea of Galilee would be a lot, roughly 5 or 6 boats in every square mile. And the shoreline would be equally busy as people processed the fish that the fishermen were bringing in, salting them, and preparing them to send out across the area, and even the whole of the Roman Empire. It's hard to imagine that a single man walking along the shore would attract much attention, and yet somehow, Jesus grabbed the hearts of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. And as a result, their lives were changed forever.

What these four men left behind was no less significant than what we would leave behind if Jesus came and called us to a new way of life today. They left behind their families and their livelihoods. This is really significant. Why would they make such a spur of the moment decision to walk away from their security, from everything they had ever known?

I think the first answer to that question is offered to us in the beginning of the passage. *"Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God... 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news!'"* Think of what we know about the good news that Jesus Christ brings. This good news is truth, hope, peace, promise, eternal life, and salvation. Jesus is telling about a new reality that is the way to life, not death. It really is, in so many ways, what we all long for the most. This is the good news that can only come in Christ, telling the story of a God who is always more ready to give than we are to ask.

Some scholars speculate that Peter, Andrew, James, and John, had already heard some of Jesus' teachings. It's even considered possible that these four men had sat with Jesus for some time as he began his ministry in the Galilean countryside. They would have soaked up his new teachings, debated their place in the Jewish traditions, and asked him the questions burning at their hearts. But nothing tells us this for sure. So, it is equally likely that these four fishermen had never even laid eyes on Jesus before. And like Nathanael, whose call story we heard last week, when these men heard this stranger speaking in the distance, they just knew, and they had to go.

But here's the thing about following Jesus—and Peter, Andrew, James, and John must have had some inkling of this. It involves a complete change of life. When Jesus beckoned the men to come and to follow him, when he told them he would make them “fish for people,” Christ wasn't just calling them to a task, like they had been fishing for fish moments before. This isn't one of those things where you say, “Right, sounds good. I'll fish for people with you on Friday at noon.” Christ actually calls his disciples to a new way of life entirely, a new way of being, and new identity. Jesus is offering them a new way to serve, something in which to invest their whole lives. This is a whole new lifestyle. And it's part of receiving the good news.

Jesus says it right there in the beginning, *“Repent and believe the good news.”* To repent is to make a complete change, a 180-degree turn-around. To be a disciple of Christ is to leave behind the old and to follow a completely new path.

Now, before you all start getting worried, I'm going to step back for a minute. Because I understand the reality we live in. We have jobs that we rely on because we have bills to pay. We are concerned about the livelihood of our children, and our ability to meet expenses in retirement. Our spouses count on us for a variety of different reasons, and they would be devastated if we just walked away from our marriage and our family. It is simply not feasible for us to consider the possibility that on a whim, we can just make the decision to turn our backs on our lives to follow Jesus in the way those early disciples did. But we also need to understand that following Jesus requires more of us than simply signing up for an insurance policy to make sure we have our bases covered.

You see, following Jesus doesn't mean we just say we believe, come to church a few times a month, and live the rest of our lives the same way we always have. To follow Jesus requires us to repent, to follow a new path, to change. We have to change our hearts and our minds to focus on the things of Jesus, and then our lives have to reflect that in the way we live. That doesn't mean we have to quit our jobs or leave our families, but it should mean that we relate to our co-workers in a different way, it should mean that we spend our free time in a different way, it should mean that we see our brothers and sisters in a new light and treat them accordingly.

A few years ago, a friend of mind posted an article from the Huffington Post on his Facebook page. It showed up this week on my Memories. The title of the article is, “4 Teachings of Jesus That His Followers (Almost) Never Take Seriously.”

Anybody want to guess what those four teachings are? You could probably figure it out without too much trouble. But here are the four things the article lifted up as teachings that Jesus' followers don't actually follow:

1. Jesus, not the Bible, is God's living and active Word that brings life. John's gospel begins, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was light for all people."*
2. The only way to enter the Kingdom of Heaven is through DOING the will of God. Jesus ends his Sermon on the Mount with a significant challenge, telling those who listen, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*
3. Condemnation isn't Jesus' style. Jesus says, *"I have not come to condemn the world, but to save it."* And finally,
4. You're supposed to sacrifice yourself and speak words of blessings for those you disagree with the most. Remember that teaching from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

What does it mean that the world looks at us and says, in essence, "Christians don't follow the most basic teachings of Jesus?" Well, it probably means that we haven't fully taken up the call of Jesus to "follow." It probably means that we are sort of floating along in the proverbial Sea of Galilee commenting about the nice message that man on the shore was shouting about, all the while hoping that we have done "enough" to inherit God's kingdom, when in reality our lives haven't really changed as a result of our belief in Christ.

Thousands of years ago, four ordinary men left everything behind because they heard the good news of God's kingdom and the call to follow Christ. What could Jesus do with you if you only follow him? What could Jesus do with you, not if you changed your life, but if you truly allowed him to change your heart and your mind, and you lived your life differently as a result? Are you really following Christ, or have you just taken out an insurance policy?

These questions truly matter. And I could tell you story after story of plain, ordinary, simple folk, just like you and I, who have taken their call to follow Christ seriously. Indeed, their lives have changed as a result, but more importantly, they helped change the lives of others with the good news of Christ. Are people going to be telling stories about you twenty years from now, or a hundred years from now? Because here's the thing, if we will follow Christ, we too can be "fishers of people," even in our own homes, in our workplaces, in our communities. All we have to do is leave behind all those excuses we make. All we have to do is believe in the Christ who calls us. It may seem hard, but it's not impossible by any stretch, and that is good news.

"Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people."