

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, January 21, 2024
3rd Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 3/Year B

First Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:14-20

Sermon Title: “Responding to the Call of the Kingdom”

Theme

As we continue through the time after Epiphany, stories of the call to discipleship show us the implications of our baptismal calling to show Christ to the world. Jesus begins proclaiming the good news and calling people to repentance right after John the Baptist is arrested for preaching in a similar way. Knowing that John was later executed, we see at the very outset the cost of discipleship. Still, the two sets of brothers leave everything they have known and worked for all their lives to follow Jesus and fish for people.

Texts:

First Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

²⁹Brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ³⁰and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not

rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions,³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Gospel: Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Sermon

Finally, we are into the Gospel of Mark! Had we not supplanted *The Baptism of our Lord* with *The Epiphany of our Lord* on January 7, we would have heard most of the beginning of Mark's Gospel, which was the introduction of John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus. That reading was Mark 1:4-11. Curiously, according to Mark, after Jesus was baptized, we have Mark's very brief account of Jesus's Temptation in the Wilderness. The reason that brief account was not linearly included on either The Baptism of Our Lord or today's Third Sunday after Epiphany, which are on either side of the Temptation in the Wilderness narrative, is that the lectionary saves Jesus's Temptation in the Wilderness for the beginning of Lent. So we will hear it read to us on the weekend of Sunday, February 18th, the First Sunday in Lent.

This matters to those who participated in my Fall Bible Study entitled, "Looking Forward to Mark." Furthermore, I think it is helpful to know that since today's Gospel Reading begins, ¹⁴*Now after John was arrested*,. You see, the lectionary presents things a little out of order.

And speaking of being 'out of order,' last week had the call of Jesus' first disciples, Philip and Nathanael according to John. In today's Gospel Reading according to Mark, we have the call of Jesus's first disciples, Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, and James and his brother John. Yes, there is a discrepancy. Who is right and who is wrong, you may be thinking. I don't think it matters. The gospels were written down years after the Resurrection by later disciples who decided that since Jesus had not yet returned, they should record what they remembered what Mark and John said for future generations, including us, so there is room for discrepancy.

On to what does matter. Today we explore the transformative theme of answering the call to discipleship. Our reading begins with us witnessing the profound moments when Jesus calls His first disciples, at least according to Mark. As we delve into this passage, we will uncover the timeless principles of discipleship and the invitation that echoes through the ages. As we begin, I ask that our hearts be open to the transformative power of saying "yes" to the call of discipleship.

Our narrative begins with the proclamation of Jesus' ministry. In verses 14-15, we hear the words that set the stage for the calling of disciples:

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

This proclamation marks the beginning of a new era, the arrival of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ. His message is clear: it is time to turn away from old ways and embrace the good news of salvation. The call to discipleship is intricately woven into this proclamation, signaling a radical shift in the lives of those who would choose to follow Jesus.

In the subsequent verses, we witness the specific moments when Jesus extends the call to discipleship. As Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, He encounters Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, and the brothers, James and John—all fishermen going about their daily tasks. Jesus's invitation is simple yet profound:

¹⁷“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” (Face of Jesus)

What strikes me about this call is its immediacy and the response it elicits from these ordinary men. Without hesitation, they leave their nets, their livelihoods, and their comfort zones to follow Jesus. It is a pivotal moment—a call that transforms their identities and redirects the course of their lives.

Saturday - Earlier we sang “I have decided to follow Jesus” and “Make me a servant” and our Song of the Day that we will sing after the sermon is “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.” I would be careful about looking into the eyes of Jesus. Look what happened to these four.

Sunday – Our Gathering Hymn was “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling.” I would be careful about looking into the eyes of Jesus. Look what happened to these four. And oh, our Sending Hymn will be “O Jesus, I have Promised.” Hmmm.

Principles of Discipleship in Mark

As we explore the call to discipleship in Mark, several principles emerge, offering us profound insights into the essence of following Jesus:

The Sovereignty of God's Timing: Jesus declares, ¹⁵“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.”

Discipleship is not a random event; it unfolds in God's perfect timing. When Jesus extends His call, it is an opportune moment for transformation and alignment with the kingdom.

The Nature of Jesus' Message: The heart of Jesus's message is the gospel of God—good news that brings about repentance and belief. Discipleship involves turning away from the old and turning toward the transformative power of the gospel. And it is not a ‘once and done’ kind of event. It is an ongoing process of daily repentance and renewal of faith.

The Simplicity of the Invitation: Jesus's call to discipleship is straightforward: "Follow me." Discipleship begins with a personal invitation from Jesus, and our response to His call shapes the trajectory of our lives. It is an invitation to journey with Him, to learn from Him, and to be transformed by His presence. I tell people all the time, “We are defined by our future, not our past.” Once we have accepted Jesus’s call to discipleship, which includes repentance and renewal, we cannot look back at where we were once stuck.

The Response of Faith: The disciples' response is marked by immediacy and faith. They leave their occupations and follow Jesus without delay.

This has *not* been my experience and I doubt many of you have had their experience either. By the grace of God, I was born to Christian parents who had me baptized as a baby and raised me in the church. There was never a time in my life when I did not have faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. My faith has ebbed and flowed throughout the years but I never doubted. If your story is similar to mine then we may not be able to get our heads around the dramatic transformation of the first disciples.

Nevertheless, active discipleship is like a partnership between the Holy Spirit and the disciple. And like the disciples in the Gospel Reading, we too must have a willingness to leave behind the familiar and trust in the One who calls.

The Promise of Transformation: Jesus assures the disciples that following Him will lead to transformation. He says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Discipleship involves a process of becoming—becoming more like Christ,

becoming agents of His kingdom, and becoming instruments of God's redemptive work. I hope you are receptive to that call to discipleship.

The Ongoing Invitation to Discipleship

The call to discipleship is not confined to the shores of the Sea of Galilee; it reverberates through the pages of time, reaching us in our present time. The same Jesus who walked beside the fishermen now walks with us, extending a personal invitation to follow Him.

Jesus Knows Us by Name: Just as Jesus called Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John by name, He knows each of us intimately. The call to discipleship is not a generic invitation, a cattle call; it is a personal call that acknowledges us individually and invites us into a unique relationship with Jesus.

Discipleship as a Lifelong Journey: The call to discipleship is not a one-time event that we can check off our list, but a continuous journey. It involves the daily decision to follow Jesus, to align our lives with His teachings, and to allow His transformative work to unfold in us. This is what he meant when Martin Luther said we need to revisit the font of our baptism daily. Discipleship is a lifelong commitment to growing in intimacy with Christ.

Leaving Behind the Nets of the Past: Just as the disciples left their nets, we are called to leave behind the entanglements of our past—sin, worldly pursuits, and self-centered ambitions. Discipleship requires a willingness to detach from anything that hinders our walk with Christ.

Becoming Fishers of People: The promise of transformation echoes in Jesus' declaration that He will make us become fishers of people. I think this is the most difficult part of Jesus's call to discipleship for Lutherans. And I am not alone in this thinking. Last week I had a thirty-minute phone conversation with an old retired pastor who served Grace in Austintown up until 1981. I have never met Him, but we got talking and we both agreed that we Lutherans have counted on steamships from Germany and Scandinavia to bring Lutherans over from the old country and for those Lutherans to have babies for us to grow the church. Well look around, not many of us are of childbearing age. That was never what Jesus meant. He literally meant that we are to go and bring people who do not know Him

into a meaningful relationship with Him through the church. Discipleship equips us to participate in God's mission of reconciling the world to Himself. Do you believe that? Do you believe that you are equipped to do that? A life of discipleship under the lordship of Jesus Christ says you are. We are to be instruments of His grace, drawing others into the transformative journey of discipleship.

Challenges on the Discipleship Journey

While the call to discipleship is marked by the promise of transformation and purpose, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that may arise on this transformative journey.

Surrendering Control: Discipleship challenges us to surrender control and trust in God's plans. Like the disciples leaving their nets, we are called to release our grip on the familiar and trust in the sovereignty of God.

Facing Uncertainty: The disciples faced uncertainty as they followed Jesus into the unknown. Discipleship often involves stepping into unfamiliar territory, trusting that Jesus is leading us toward His purposes.

Embracing Sacrifice: Leaving behind the nets of the past may involve sacrifice—sacrificing our comfort, our ambitions, and our desires for the sake of following Christ. Discipleship requires a willingness to embrace sacrificial living.

The Promise of Discipleship

As we navigate the challenges of discipleship, we must hold firmly to the promises embedded in Jesus' call. Discipleship is not a burdensome journey but a path illuminated by the transformative power of Christ.

Transformation of Character: Discipleship leads to the transformation of character. As we follow Jesus, He shapes us into individuals who reflect His love, compassion, and holiness. The process of discipleship molds us into the likeness of Christ.

Purpose and Direction: Discipleship provides purpose and direction for our lives. Just as the disciples found a new purpose as fishers of people, our journey of discipleship unveils God's unique calling for us in His redemptive plan.

Intimacy with Christ: Discipleship deepens our intimacy with Christ. Through prayer, study of Scripture, and daily communion with the Holy Spirit, we draw closer to the heart of God. Our relationship with Jesus becomes a source of comfort, guidance, and joy.

Participation in God's Kingdom: Discipleship invites us to participate in the advancement of God's kingdom. Like the disciples who became foundational figures in the early Church, our lives as disciples contribute to God's unfolding story of grace and love in the world.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

As we conclude this inspirational journey into discipleship, let our hearts be stirred by the timeless call of Jesus to follow Him. The call to discipleship is not confined to the pages of ancient scripture but extends to each one of us, beckoning us into a transformative relationship with Christ.

May we heed the call with immediacy and faith, leaving behind the nets of the past and embracing the promise of transformation. Discipleship is not merely an invitation to follow; it is an invitation to become—becoming more like Christ, becoming fishers of people, and becoming active participants in God's redemptive work.

As we answer the call to discipleship, may our lives reflect the transformative power of following Jesus, and may our journey inspire others to embark on their own path of discipleship.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we say we want to see you face to face and look into your eyes, but if the truth were known, the idea frightens us. We say we are your disciples but often, our actions or lack thereof betray us. Be patient with us, and continue to send your Holy Spirit upon us so that we are inspired to tell the Good News of our lives in you to those who do not yet know you so that they too may come to trust in you. Inspire us to be about Kingdom business. We pray this in your name. Amen