

Mark 1: 14-20 "The Miracle of Being Called" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/31/21

A recent survey that came out from Pew Research indicates that 1 in 4 Americans report a significant increase in their faith since COVID hit. The health crisis has apparently led some to reevaluate and question how they live their lives. We used to call this type of self-questioning a "mid-life crisis," but I prefer to talk of it as a second journey into life. A man piles up an impressive portfolio of dollars and honors, gets his name in Forbes magazine, and then wakes up one morning asking, "Is it all worth it?" More than ever before, competent teachers, nurses, and clergy can reach the top only to discover that their job no longer fascinates them. They find themselves terrified of stagnation and ask, "Should I switch careers? Would returning to school help?" Gail Sheehy, well-known author, began her second journey at 35 when she was covering a story in northern Ireland. She was standing next to a young man when a bullet blew off his face. On that Bloody Sunday, she came face to face with death and with what she called the "arithmetic of life." She realized, "No one is with me. No one keeps me safe. There is no one who won't ever leave me alone." That day threw her off balance and flung at her a barrage of painful questions about her ultimate purpose and values. In those moments, she was ripe to begin a second journey.

Today's Gospel story does not reveal any such obvious crisis, yet four fishermen likewise begin their own second journeys. Their life circumstances seem to indicate that Simon and Andrew were poor as Mark makes no mention of a boat. They cast their nets from the shallows of the sea, and sort their catch on the beach by themselves. However, James and John probably had more to walk away from as their story includes a boat, hired men, and their father Zebedee. But rich or poor, both sets of brothers turned away from all the familiar aspects of

their lives in order to go after a stranger who called them to follow. If we research archaeological and historical documents surrounding the time and location, we discover that the Sea of Galilee from which they were fishing is the lowest freshwater lake on Earth, which makes it prone to sudden violent storms. Therefore, fishing was a dangerous business, but it was the prime money-maker for the local towns. The fish industry was being restructured to accommodate more exports so the majority of fish were salt preserved or made into a fish sauce and shipped to distant markets. All fishing had become state-regulated for the benefit of the urban elite. Both Greeks and Romans who had settled in Palestine as well as Jews who aligned themselves with King Herod's family profited from the fish industry. First, they controlled the sale of fishing leases, without which locals could not fish. These rights were normally awarded not to individuals, but to local kinship-based cooperatives, like the brothers Simon and Andrew or the Zebedee family. Second, those in power taxed the fish product and its processing, and levied tolls on product transport. The result was that formerly self-sufficient native fishing families were marginalized and fishermen fell to the bottom of an increasingly elaborate economic hierarchy. Roman poet Cicero reflects the perspective of the elites as he writes, "the most shameful occupations are those which cater to our sensual pleasures such as fish-sellers, butchers, cooks, poultry-raisers and fishermen." Our Gospel story doesn't overtly point to a crisis at hand, but clearly the fishermen in our story are being exploited and oppressed by the influencers who keep their feet planted firmly on the necks of these folks.

So were they looking for a second journey in life? If so, Mark doesn't say, but instead keeps the focus on Jesus and his immediate mission. Things happen quickly in the Gospel of Mark, whose favorite word for transitioning between stories is the word, "immediately." There

is no time for back-stories because, as Jesus says, “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Mark was the first Gospel written and the author is concerned about quickly getting the news out. The problem is we have taken this story whose focus is on Jesus and his mission and made it a story about the fishermen, how they were heroes to drop everything and go. I can’t tell you how many times I have heard that take, but I believe it misses the point. The story is not about the delusion that we can, by our good decisions and good deeds, save ourselves. It is not about the idea that if we just work hard enough, pray enough, give enough then life’s second journey will be a success and God will claim us as Christ’s disciples. This belief is a form of idolatry probably stemming from that phrase, “God helps those who help themselves” (incidentally, not found anywhere in the Bible).

The fact that the fishermen went along with Jesus is a strange twist to be sure. But Mark would not have us dwell on what strength and courage these four men had. According to the author, there was nothing hard about it at all. Jesus called and they followed. Period. They did not know him nor were they waiting to be rescued from their circumstances. They probably didn’t even describe themselves as religious, but they took one look at him and that was that. No torn hearts, no backward glances - they just dropped what was in their hands and went after Jesus, without saying a word. It was not as if they decided something, it was more like something happened to them, something almost mysterious and sacred beyond explanation. For this reason, Barbara Brown Taylor asserts that this is not a hero story but a miracle story, as full of God’s power as the feeding of the 5000 or the raising of the dead. Listen to the language of miracle stories in Mark. In 1: 41, Jesus says to the leper, “Be made clean,” and immediately he was made clean. In 2: 11, Jesus says to the paralyzed man, “Stand up, take your mat and go

to your home,” and the man stood up and immediately took his mat and went home. Again and again, the pattern continues. “Follow me,” Jesus said, and immediately they left their nets and followed him. Do you hear it? This is no story about the courage of human beings to change their lives, to leave everything behind, to go off into the unknown, as worthy as those ideals might be. This is a story about the power of God to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just a moment ago, instilling hope for a new tomorrow when oppression, poverty and yes even a pandemic have squeezed the very breath out of life. This is not a story about us, as much as it is a story about God, and God’s ability not only to call us out of our circumstances, but also to create us into people who are able to follow. God makes us into followers because we can’t take our eyes off the one who calls us, because the one who calls us interests us more than anything else in our lives.

With such a calling and an interest in the one who calls, we naturally would seek to follow Jesus’ original intent and mission on earth. Scholar Chad Meyers helps us reclaim that mission. He asserts that Mark’s inclusion of the phrase, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people” invites listeners to remember the circumstances in which the fishermen were living. They have been marginalized by society, victims of the rich and powerful in Israel. This metaphor of fishing relates back to the Hebrew scriptures, where in Jeremiah it symbolizes God’s disapproval of Israel and in Amos & Ezekiel, catching fish with hooks is used to represent divine judgment upon the rich and powerful. Jesus, as God’s teacher who relied heavily on Hebrew scriptures, invites the four to become fishers of people, thereby inviting these common fishermen, to join him in his struggle to overturn the existing social order of power and

privilege. When Jesus says, "Follow me," he is not inviting people to drop everything and leave this hostile world for some other world, but he is inviting us to partner with him in changing this world in such a way that it will cease to be hostile and unjust. As fishers of people, those 4 fishermen learned to hold accountable those who would use power and privilege selfishly and they would uplift those who had been broken by the world. Thus, the story remains as intended – not a story about how we can earn a place as Christ's disciples, but a story about Jesus' mission to transform this world to reflect the kingdom of God. That is our calling, maybe even the second journey we undertake in life. Those four fishermen gave up a lot, that is not in question, but to stress that aspect of the story is to put the accent on the wrong syllable. Their minds were not on what they were leaving, but on whom they were joining. Their heads didn't cleave to what was falling from their hands, but to what they were reaching out to find, and in that God-drenched moment, the miracle occurred: their wills were not two, three or four, but one will. Their lives flowed in the same direction as Christ's. Time was fulfilled as the kingdom came, ...and comes, every time our lives are brought into that same flow, as we become fishers of people, lovers of justice and advocates for a more peaceful world.