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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, January 21, 2018
3rd Sunday After Epiphany/Lectionary 3/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: Mark 1:14-20
Sermon Title: “Follow Me”

Theme

Before Jesus calls his first disciples, he proclaims a message that becomes known as “the gospel” or good news from God. God is ready to rule our lives. Those who realize this will respond with repentance and faith.

Text

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.”

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

Sermon

Today, this Third Sunday After Epiphany, we have more stories of call. In the 1st Reading from the Old Testament book of Jonah we have the call Jonah. And back in Mark's gospel today, we have the call of Simon and Andrew and James and John.

Let's begin by developing a common understanding of this concept of call. Many have the idea that call is something bigger and clearer and more grandiose than is appropriate. Many think the disciples were called, and that is true. We call it that in the scripture. If you look in your Bible at the passage that is our Gospel reading today, your Bible may have a bold heading that says something like, "The Call of the First Disciples."

Many think that pastors and other religious professionals are called and that is also true. Martin Luther was caught in a storm and nearly struck by lightning and interpreted that as a call to ministry. My own story is much less dramatic, but I do believe that I am standing where and doing exactly what God has planned for me.

But then when it comes to you, the laity of the church, you often think you are excluded. "Call is something they receive, but not us" you might be thinking. But that is not true. I was not nearly struck by lightning, like Brother Martin. I did not hear a disembodied voice, like the Prophet Jonah or the Apostle Paul did. For me it was just a constant nagging, maybe nudging is another word for it. And so I finally gave in, and went a new direction with my life – but in my previous life prior to ministry I tried as hard as you do to live a godly life. That was my call then. I was occasionally a Sunday School teacher, occasionally on the Stewardship Committee or the Evangelism Committee of one church or another. That was my call then, and I lived that call as faithfully as I could, the same as I hope you do. That is a call, a call to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sometimes that call might be to something we don't want to do. That was the case for Jonah. Jonah was an Israelite. The Ninevites he was called to minister to were the enemy of his people. He wanted them dead! But they were God's creation and God wanted them to turn from their godless ways. The reason Jonah found himself in the belly of the whale is because he rejected God's call and went the other way. So God caused him to get swallowed up by a whale and that whale went to the

shores of Nineveh and spit him out. That got his attention and so he acquiesced and preached a message of repentance to the Ninevites, albeit it, half-heartedly.

The motivation of the Apostle Paul is different. When Paul was Saul before his conversion, he was a zealous Pharisee. In his defense, he persecuted Christians because he cared passionately for the orthodoxy of his Jewish faith. Unfortunately for him, he was wrong, and so he too was nearly struck by lightning in order for Jesus to get his attention. But then, once shown the error of his ways, and the mercy of God, and the truth of the love of God demonstrated on the cross of Christ, he became a zealous apostle for the Lord Jesus Christ. Same guy, same passion, just re-directed for truth and godly good.

So, you are called. I am sure of it. You may not have as dramatic a story to tell – I think we can be thankful that we didn't need to be redirected by a whale or struck by lightning. But you are called. Your job then, as a faithful disciple is to figure out where you fit in to God's plan. That is your holy work to do.

By the way, on that note, the Nominating Committee is frustrated with a lack of disciples willing to serve the church on Council. We have a need for counters, the people who count the offering each week, we have a need for ushers, and coffee hour hosts, and choir members, and, well, the list goes on and on. If you need help figuring out your call, you come see me, we'll work on it together.

You call it what you want, but if you are hearing my voice then it is because you have been called and you have responded to that call by entering into a life of Christian discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ – have decided to follow him.

It is appropriate that this weekend we celebrate the baptism of Joseph Aaron Wages, because you see, his parents, Brian and Laura Wages, have themselves responded to the call of the same Holy Spirit of the Living God revealed in Jesus Christ and seek baptism, the initiation rite into the life of discipleship, for their son.

It is the same rite into which they were both baptized years ago, and because their parents were faithful Christians themselves and made good on the covenantal words they agreed to at their child's baptisms, now Brian and Laura and Joseph's sponsors want that life of discipleship for their son, Joseph.

And it was the same way for you, if you are baptized. All mainline Christian churches say similar words and repeat similar actions in baptism, so it matters not whether you were baptized at Zion, or in a Lutheran Church or any other Christian church. If you are baptized, then you are on a journey of discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Now, you can reject that covenant your parents made for you. That is your prerogative. God revealed in Jesus Christ loves you that much, that he give you that choice. But here is the problem you will have if you choose to do that; God will remain faithful to God's part of that covenant - forever. Just ask Jonah, God will stick to you like glue and will always be near you,

- protecting you when you wander off to find where demons dwell,
- to celebrate with you when you celebrate,
- to weep with you when you weep,
- and to guide you back if and when you turn around and seek God.

That's the covenant God makes with the baptized.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

My Raisin' the Bar Challenge for you this week is to reflect on these stories of call from the Gospel of Mark. Reflect on the lives of these disciples and the others and notice that their lives were not perfect paths of godly living. It matters not that they made mistakes along the way, God's grace is sufficient for those times when they / we mess up. What is important is that once they realized the love, grace, and mercy of God revealed in Jesus Christ, they could do nothing else other than follow him.

And then reflect on your own lives of discipleship. Yes, mistakes have been made. There were times when we veered off the path left or right. Hear this, none of that matters, turn from your ways and seek the LORD, and all is well. Then ask the Holy Spirit of the Living God revealed in Jesus Christ to lead you along the right path – and it will happen. You have been called, “come follow me” says the Lord.

Prayer

Almighty God, by grace alone you call us and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and make us worthy of your call, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen