

**Immediately They Left
Mark 1:14-20**

**Dranesville UMC
Sunday, January 24, 2021**

In our lifetimes, there will be times when unforeseen events will change the course of our individual lives and the larger course of history. Without going into great detail, here are a few of the events which, to varying degrees, had a direct impact on me over the past forty years or so:

- The bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in October 1983
- The major earthquake in California in October 1989
- The First Gulf War in 1991
- 9/11
- The DC sniper in 2002
- 2020; especially the drastic changes caused by the COVID pandemic
- The recent riot at the U.S. Capitol Building

In every case, I was just minding my own business, going about my normal routine, when the event either occurred or I first heard of it. In nearly every instance, I knew my life would be different; but usually had no idea how. You may want to make your own list of events like these.

Today's Gospel Lesson describes an event which would dramatically change the lives of four men. Of course, they could have no idea what that change would be.

This passage may be unsettling to many of us. Mark tells us that Jesus encountered these four individuals, summoned them to follow him, and they immediately left their business, their families, their homes, and everything else which was familiar to them to respond to his call. If you're like me, you may have a LOT of questions. Had Jesus ever had any interaction with any of these four prior to calling them? What did they think Jesus meant when he told them they would fish for people? Did they think they would become the disciples of a religious teacher, or did they expect something else? Did they give any thought to what they were leaving behind? Was there time to say goodbye, turn the business over to someone else, grab a change of clothes or do anything else to

prepare themselves to go on the road with Jesus? Where did they think they were going? Given the fact the men followed immediately, seemingly with no questions asked, we might ask ourselves, "Is this a call story or a miracle story?" Miracles are, after all, occurrences which defy rational explanation.

Prior to calling these four men, Jesus had just begun preaching that the kingdom of God has come near (Some translations read, "is at hand."). He called the people to repent and believe the good news. The ones Jesus called may have had an inkling that they would be involved in some unspecified way in this kingdom.

The time was fulfilled or at hand. It was time for fishermen to do something different with their lives. Maybe you have had those times in your life when it was time to do something else; especially as it pertains to your service to the Lord.

That time came for me in the spring of 1990 when I received word that, due to failure to be selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel, I would have to retire from the Marine Corps in the next four years after 20 years of commissioned service. I had, for years, had a sense that I should be doing something else with my life; something entirely different. I believed it involved a more intentional means to serve God. A combination of circumstances resulted in attending Duke Divinity School upon retirement in 1994 and subsequently serving as a pastor in the Virginia Annual Conference from 1997 to the present.

Is the time at hand for you? Is it time to do something different? By no means am I implying that you should follow a path to ordination like I did; but maybe there is someone listening to me today who does have that sense. For the rest, there are many other ways to serve which are of equal or greater significance.

The kingdom has drawn near. The timing is in God's hands. Our response should be to repent and believe the gospel. Repentance means a change of mind that leads to a change of behavior. Emotions are entirely secondary. The call goes out and we're expected to respond - to follow Jesus; not some party, ideology or philosophy; not a set of rules or traditions.

Jesus' call apparently conveyed a sense of urgency. Mark tells us the men left "at once," or "immediately." The Greek word *euthys* is translated various ways in Mark - immediately, suddenly, at once, without delay. This word appears more

than forty times. It seems like everything and everyone in Mark is in a great hurry. The kingdom of God has come near and time's a-wastin'.

Although nothing tells us WHY these four responded without hesitation, their response was immediate. Somewhat ironically, they were compelled to follow a man whom they would often not understand, on a journey that will perplex and confuse them, to an as-yet-unspecified destination. Responding to Jesus often provides no answers - only questions; no security - but rejection and danger instead.

Notice that, while Jesus had begun his preaching ministry, he called the men as individuals. Preaching is intended for crowds; the call to follow comes to individuals.

Jesus' underlying message to these men was, "I'm going to change the whole world, transform the future, radically rearrange the present, and guess who's going to help me?" They were being summoned to be part of a revolution; the likes of which the world had never seen before.

Jesus' first act in that process was to start by creating a community as a sign of the coming of the kingdom. This is the beginning of the Church; which we consider to be both visible and invisible. The Church consists not just of those with whom we have fellowship; but all those who have gone before and those who will follow as well. Discipleship means placing one's trust in God's direction for living, rather than in one's material resources. It also means finding one's sense of family in a community bound solely by an allegiance to Jesus.

Aside from the uniqueness of this revolution, what is remarkable is that Jesus called ordinary men. They had no political experience. They were not teachers or religious scholars. They had no economic clout. These men could have been any one of us.

Another factor we need to remember is that Jesus' ministry did not take place in the midst of a gentle, quiet, backwater. Palestine was nothing like that. It has never been. Jesus began at a time of conflict, threat, racial mixture and busy activity. This could have been in our backyard.

Jesus' call was authoritative and nonnegotiable. Faith is not a commodity or a consumer product for us to pick and choose.

Jesus' call was for these men to fish for people. The Church is still called to that task. Fishing for people, sharing the gospel with those who have never heard it, is the mission. Too often we confuse that mission with tending the aquarium; maintaining the status quo. The analogy may break down, but we don't usually fish by hanging around and waiting for the fish to jump in the boat. We have to go where they are and actively pursue them.

If the fishing analogy hasn't broken down for you yet, consider this: Fishing, as practiced in First Century Palestine, was a team effort. Several men, sometimes several boat crews, worked together to handle the large nets used for fishing. Fishing for people, what we know as evangelism, is a team effort.

I was once asked how many people I had personally brought to faith in Jesus Christ. My response was that there were people whom I had help get started to explore the faith. There were others whom I worked with after someone else had gotten them started. There were still other persons whom I was working with when they made the decision to accept Christ. I could say with certainty that there was no individual with whom I had worked from the time they first started to explore the faith until they accepted Christ as their Savior. I am not ashamed of that. Helping persons come to faith is not a task for a Lone Ranger.

Let me return to the idea that, like those four fishermen in Galilee, we each have a call on our lives. In this society in which we mistakenly focus on the rights and prerogatives of the individual, we may erroneously think we are the product of our decisions. We're the product of **God's** decisions. As baptized followers of Jesus, the lives we live are not our own. God has plans for us. Let me illustrate with two stories which demonstrate the extent and seriousness of God's call. The first story is of a response few of us will have to make. The second describes something closer to what we may be able to do.

The first story is related by Baptist pastor David Wesley Reid.

"One day in 1810, the father of Ann Hasseltine received a letter from a young man named Adoniram Judson, asking for permission to court his daughter so that she could accompany him on his mission to India. It read like this: 'I have now to

ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next Spring, to see her no more in this world; whether you can consent to her departure for a heathen land, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of missionary life...to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. Can you consent to all this for the sake of Him who left his heavenly home and died for her and you?"

History records that the father's answer was, "Yes."

The second story is an account of Bishop Will Willimon's experience one night when he was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, where he served for over twenty years, prior to his election to the episcopacy. He was invited to speak to a fraternity; a requirement of the dean to (in Willimon's words) "allegedly help give the fraternities some semblance of respectability." His assigned topic was "Character and College." Willimon thought, "Lord, thou hast delivered them into my hands. I can't believe they are dumb enough to invite an old guy like me to talk to young guys like them on 'character.'"

When Willimon knocked on the door of the fraternity, he was greeted by a young boy of nine or ten. He wondered, "What is a kid doing over here at this time of night? Surely there are rules against young children in the dorm this late." The boy said, "They're waiting for you in the common room. Follow me, I'll take you there."

After winding their way back to the common room, he found the fraternity gathered, glumly, waiting his presentation. As Dean Willimon was about to begin his remarks, he noticed that the little boy climbed into the lap of one of the brothers. Soon, he fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college student.

As Willimon describes it, "I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about a half an hour. When I finally finished my talk I asked if they had any questions or concerns. Dead silence. So I thanked them for the honor and made my way out. I heard the college kid say to the little boy, 'You go on and get ready for bed. I'll be in to tuck you in and read you a story.'

“When we stood outside the door, the fraternity boy lit a cigarette, took a drag on it, and thanked me for coming out.

“‘Let me ask you,’ I said, ‘Who was the kid here tonight?’

“‘Oh, that’s Darrell,’ he said. ‘The fraternity is part of the Durham Big Brother program. We met Darrell that way. His mom’s on crack and having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad she can’t care for him. So, we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us. We go over, pick him up, and he stays with us until it’s okay to go home. We take him to school, buy him his clothes, books and stuff.’

“‘That’s amazing,’ I said. ‘I take back all that I said about you people being bad and irresponsible.’”

“‘I tell you what’s amazing,’ he said as he took another drag on his cigarette. ‘What’s amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else.’”

On his way back to his car that night, Bishop Willimon said to Jesus, “It’s an odd way to do a revolution. Still, by the grace of God, it works.”

When Jesus called his first disciples along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he began an amazing practice that continues to this day. For reasons known only to God, the kingdom of God is in the hands of a bunch of amateurs. That includes all of us. I may have a few years of formal education in things of God; but I am very much an amateur like everybody else.

The small band which grew to be the Church today - the body of Christ with some two billion followers - began with these four fishermen and a handful of others like them; persons who were called by Jesus to leave their old ways behind. They, inexplicably, immediately left and followed. They had to count the cost, which they eventually did, and stepped out in faith. The call on our lives is the same. We look with eyes of faith which enable us to distinguish right from wrong. We test and confirm the way. Faith enables us to see things that cannot otherwise be seen; whereas blind obedience does not allow us to see anything.

This is a challenging time. It’s also a time for new beginnings; a time to leave our nets behind and respond to Jesus’ call as we perceive it. Amen.