

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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Text: Mark 1:14-20

Title: “Bread, Bath & Beyond: Beyond the Horizon”

There is a scene in one of another of my favorite movies, “A River Runs Through It”, in which Norman, the elder son, returns home from graduating from Dartmouth College. His father is a Presbyterian minister who has a passion for fly fishing, a passion he’s passed on to his two sons. When Norman comes home to Mazzula, Montana, his father calls him into his study and asks his son what he plans to do with the education he’s received. Norman isn’t certain. Questioned further by his father who suggests ministry in the church as a possibility, Norman suggests that he might teach. And his father asks him, “Do you think this could be your calling?” Norman looks at his father as if he has no idea what his father is talking about.

I understand Norman’s situation. When I was in high school and in the early years of college, if you had told me I would one day serve the church as an ordained pastor, I would have looked at you as if I had no idea what you were talking about. It was the furthest thing from my mind. I focused on the sciences in school, liked chemistry and math. I liked numbers and did well in school using them. I didn’t see myself preaching in a million years, especially because I came to understand that I’m an introvert which makes public speaking challenging. Yet, somehow through a process of listening to people like my girlfriend who would become my wife, my pastor who would become a good friend, and God’s Spirit nudging me forward, I entered the long process of education and examination to become an ordained pastor. It has been my calling for nearly 35 years now.

Not everyone is called to ordained ministry, of course. I’ve heard it said that pastors are a bit like manure: pile them all up and they create a lot of stink, but spread them around and they can do a lot of good. Thankfully, not everyone is called to ordained ministry, but when we are a Christ-follower, God does call us to service whether to ordained parish ministry or to some other ministry in which God can use us for good because there is a lot of good that needs doing.

This last week schools were on heightened alert in Bay, Midland & Saginaw counties because of a threat made on a social media sight called Yik yak. This last week ISIS threatened their terrorist acts again, this time against Japanese citizens. This last week someone was lonely. Someone else was struggling again with the trauma of some memory of an experience they’d rather forget. This last week, someone was in need of prayer. Someone else in need of food or clothes or healing or a job. We know there is a need to express what is good about life in the world. How might God be calling us to serve in a world so often in need of good news? Are we willing and able to trust God to equip us with the strength and skill needed to serve?

In the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus is walking along the pebble-covered beach. The water is clear blue. Beautiful. Cold. Wind blows to the west off the Golan Heights, cliff-like land formations on the east side of the lake. Fisherman all along the shore. Taking care of their equipment and the night's catch. He calls them: "Follow me and I'll make you fish for people." First Peter and Andrew. Two brothers. Then James and John, also brothers, who leave their father and hired men, a thriving family business. Immediately, it says in Mark, they leave it all to follow Jesus.

Christians have speculated about whether or not the fishermen knew Jesus prior to this encounter. Galilee is not a large area, so it's possible they had come into contact with this preacher before, heard about this young upstart from Nazareth who would have walked about 40 miles to get to the waters' edge from his home in Nazareth. Maybe they encountered him previously. Maybe they didn't, but the story is clear that when Jesus did call them to follow, they had a decision to make. Either follow him or stay. They couldn't put it off. The choice they made would alter the rest of their lives.

Can you imagine making such a choice? What could be so compelling that you would drop everything and follow? And is that what it means to be a follower of Jesus? Leaving everything without a struggle? Without making sure families were cared for? Without Peter checking with his wife? James and John not having or taking time to make sure the family business is covered? What could be so compelling that you would risk it all in order to overcome whatever fear would hold you back?

Maybe I've got it wrong, but there are times I wonder if we're so afraid God will ask us to give something up we can't part with or so unsure about what God asks of us--that God is far too demanding with expectations so high we'll never meet them--that we resist or ignore questions like:

What is God calling me to do?

What does it mean in my life to follow Jesus?

I doubt I'll ever forget a story told by Rev. Doug Mercier who was the leader of the bishop's team of superintendents some years ago. He spoke at annual conference one year and began with a story. The setting was a saloon in a dusty town in the old west. The place packed with people when suddenly someone ran through the swinging double half-doors and yelled, "Everybody! Take cover! Big John's coming to town!" Everybody scattered. Men jumped on their horses kicking up clouds of dust as they rode to the hills. Some ran to their houses, locked themselves in. The saloon empty in matter of seconds.

Just as the dust settled on the street, a big man pushed open the saloon doors. The rattle of his spurs sounded with every heavy step on the thick wood floor. Grizzled and mean looking, he walked up to the bar and said, "Bar tender! Pour me some whiskey!" A man reached up from behind the bar, put a glass on the bar, and poured the whiskey, still on his knees. The big man took hold of the glass and slugged it down. One swallow. The bar tender asked him, "W-w-w-would you like another?" The man said, "Are you kidding? Didn't you hear? No time for that. Big John's coming to town. !"

Doug continued his address saying something like: "Sometimes that's how people think

about their superintendents.”

When I hear the story of Jesus calling disciples, I think of Doug’s story. If those fishermen had heard Jesus’ invitation to follow him with that kind of fear, do you think they would have felt compelled to risk it all and follow? Or did they experience in Jesus someone they trusted so completely that they were compelled to let go and walk with him?

And do you think it had something to do with Jesus’ message? “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Notice it’s a message of good news, not doomsday news. It’s good news of God’s coming. No Big John’s here. No hateful speech here. No condemnation here. No, “Do this or else” threatening, conditional language. It’s good news Jesus comes to share, that the reality of God’s presence is near. It’s in him. All that’s required is to turn around—which is what it means to repent—and believe it’s true. Do you think that’s the message that compelled fishermen to risk it all and follow him? Jesus was inviting them to be part of sharing this good news and who doesn’t want to be part of sharing good news, especially this good news? Who doesn’t want to be part of recognizing that the reality of God’s presence in the world means that love is stronger than hate, that justice and mercy are God’s way and not cruelty or oppression, that God is in the hearts of the humble and meek, that God seeks healing and not harm. There was good news to tell and demonstrate that would carry these disciples beyond anything they might have imagined their lives to be as people who fished for a living.

When I was pondering whether or not I was sensing an authentic call from God to enter the ordained ministry, one of the sticking points--one of my fears--had to do with what I would have to give up in order to be a pastor. When I confessed to my own pastor that I was struggling with this problem, he convinced me that God didn’t want me to be someone I could not be. God wanted, he said, the person God created me to be. God wanted the real me, not me pretending or trying to pretend to be the image of a pastor I thought should be. Jesus, after all, didn’t ask the first disciples to stop being fishermen; just do a different kind of fishing. The requirement to follow wasn’t that they instantaneously be transformed into someone they couldn’t be.

He freed me that day, my gracious pastor, my friend. He freed me to respond with an affirming, “yes”, to what I believe to be an authentic call to ordained ministry. And because of that “yes”, I’ve been blessed by the gift of sitting at the bedsides of those who have breathed their last breath and then given the privilege of celebrating those persons’ lives. I’ve been blessed to travel to places like Slidell, LA after Hurricane Katrina hit with a group of good news Christians who wanted those who were victims of forces beyond their control to know that God still cared in spite of all they’d lost. Not long ago, a group from this church traveled to Rio Bravo, Mexico, paid for and built two homes for two families, staffed a medical clinic and led a vacation Bible school as another expression of God bringing good news to the poor. I was blessed with the gift of learning about the richness and depth of the Christian faith through study at a United Methodist seminary. I have been blessed to share the ritual of baptism with people of all ages and watch as they grew to follow Jesus, too. It’s been a gift to serve in communities of faith and partner with people who have a concern for the poor and downtrodden. I’ve watched as people started new ministries in response to the prompting of God’s Spirit as has happened here with One Week/One Street, the Community Garden and the Caring Ministry Team. It has been a true pleasure to share the work of God’s good news of healing for those who suffer with people like my colleague, Dr. McIlvenna, from whom we will hear more in a moment. The privilege of standing here – or in some pulpit—week in and week out to spread the Word that God in Jesus

Christ has good news to be heard over the disconcerting noise of fear and threat and condemnation pulsing in the world is a privilege I do not take lightly. That first “yes” took me to places I never imagined I would go either, but God has been faithful.

What might your calling be? In what way might God be calling you to turn around and believe the good news and follow? Whatever it might be, remember that Jesus didn’t ask the fishermen to give up their fishing, just engage in a different kind of fishing. They weren’t asked to become someone else before they said yes to following him. God invites us as we are. We may find ourselves taken to places we never imagined ourselves to be, but the invitation to follow the good news only comes with one string: turn around and believe the good news.

I want to close with one final story about a former parishioner: Bob Hogan. Bob was a gruff old gent. Irish. A marine. Semper Fi. He was a member of the St. Luke’s congregation. Served on the “Welcomers”, a group of people established by my predecessor. Their job was to keep track of visitors on Sunday. They were then to get the names and addresses off the registration pads every week, go to the homes on Sunday afternoon, knock on the door and thank them for coming to worship, give them a small packet of information about the church. Nothing long. Nothing dramatic. Less than 10 minutes. If you asked him if he saw himself as an evangelist, he’d adamantly refuse the label. But when I think of Bob, I can hear a quote from D.T. Niles, the great Asian Christian theologian who defined evangelism as

“One beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”

I heard Bob speak up in a group once. He said, “You know, I remember when the Bruck’s visited the church one Sunday. I was the one to visit them. Now, they’re here with their kids almost every Sunday. They’re involved in the life of the church. It feels really good to be a part of that.”

I believe we are called, in the words of one writer, to “...catch folks up in God’s grace, love, and salvation”. (APA, p. 21) There’s nothing frightening about that, telling people where to find bread, inviting people to become part of a Christian community. Jesus’ call echoes through the ages: “Come. Follow me, and I’ll make you fish for people.” Following him you never know where you might wind up, but when we’re in Christ’s company and we trust in Christ, there is no fear.