

January 21, 2018
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Marl 1:14-20, Jonah 3:1-5, 10

A Short Sermon

Did you notice that how short the Bible readings are for today? Just a couple verses for each of the readings, Old Testament and New. When I was a kid going to church, I liked it when the Bible readings were short. I still do. But as a preacher it can be a challenge, you can have less to work with, when there's fewer verses.

In the case of today's gospel, it's not just that there are fewer verses, the verses seem to have less to them. Today's gospel is not just brief, it's bare, almost blank: Jesus walks along the sea, calls people to follow, and immediately they do. That's it. It's the inaugural recruiting event of a movement that changes the world, and that's all there is to it. Jesus doesn't give a carefully crafted presentation on his philosophical views and their personal and political implications, followed by a twelve point plan for their implementation. Jesus doesn't describe who he is, what he's about, what will be different with him, and why. And, perhaps the most stark and strangely unembellished—even unappealing—part of it all, Jesus doesn't say how—or even if—one's life will be better if part of this. Jesus just says, "Follow me." That's all he says, "Follow me," without any more detail or incentive than a play on words about fishing. It's not just a remarkably short reading; it's a remarkable way to build a following.

The Lutheran theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer—who became a martyr for his resistance to Hitler—Bonhoeffer wrote a book, perhaps his most famous book, called *Discipleship*¹. Sometimes this book is referred to by its longer title—a poignant title, considering what happened in the years after Bonhoeffer wrote it, how he was imprisoned and executed for his beliefs and actions—that longer title being *The Cost of Discipleship*. The book includes a chapter that focuses on the brevity, and opacity, of Jesus' call to the disciples—just what we see in the gospel reading today. Bonhoeffer notes the gospel's "stubborn silence" about anything other than the call itself, the absence of back story, the lack of didactic explication, the utter disregard for pragmatics or personal appeal, and just as odd, how effective it is. Bonhoeffer writes, "What is said about the content of discipleship? 'Follow me, walk behind me,' that is all. Going after him is something without specific content. It is truly not a program for one's life which would be sensible to implement. It is neither a goal nor an ideal to be sought. ...And what happens? Those called leave everything they have..." It's a very short sermon that Jesus preaches, there on the lakeshore, a very short sermon, and yet effective.

A bit like Jonah's sermon, in the short first reading. There's a short sermon there as well, all of one line long, also strangely effective. You may know the story of Jonah, how God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, but Jonah didn't want to do this, and so he ran away from God, and had a harrowing maritime adventure, was tossed into swirling waters where he became intimate with fish innards and was then vomited onto the shore. Now, finally Jonah heeds God's call, goes to Nineveh, preaches that the people there ought to live in a different way. Jonah preaches, without elaboration or elegance, one may even sense still an undercurrent of resistance, that Jonah tersely spits out the words of his stark, one sentence sermon—and the whole of Nineveh repents. This is the most ridiculous part of the Jonah story, says an Old Testament scholar—not a whale, not whatever happened to a man at sea, drowning himself in his distance from God—the most

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). Subsequent quotes are from Chapter Two, "The Call to Discipleship," p. 57-76.

ridiculous element of the Jonah story is that all of Nineveh would hear that short sermon and change their ways.

So also, how remarkable, how strange, how ridiculous, that Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John would just drop their nets and follow Jesus. It makes no sense that they would do so, as we have noted, as Bonhoeffer also noted. Bonhoeffer puts it yet more strongly, Bonhoeffer writes, “It is quite offensive to natural reason. Reason is impelled to reject the abruptness of the response.” Why, we must ask, would they do so? What is there in this handful of verses to invite, illuminate, justify, such behavior? Why would any reasonable person leave what they know for something uncertain and certainly unexplained, something which makes no promises about what will be in it for them, which certainly does not assure a less difficult existence?

We could note that people actually do this all the time. We could note how often there is little that is reasonable about major decisions we make in life: marriage and having children being two ready examples, moving to a new place, or changing careers, or taking on a caregiving role being others, and there are many more, things we do with unknowable impact and consequences. Familiar examples and experiences notwithstanding, we do not usually claim that we do what we do because of our inability to assess a situation or calculate effects. Instead, there is a commonly held belief that we evaluate, and then we act; that we think, before we do; that we must think, before we do. I cannot argue against such advice, but, alas it cannot, it does not, explain human behavior, which poets have always known, and which neuroscientists and social science researchers are also uncovering. You have probably heard any number of studies, as I have, that show how often it is the case that before think, we do; that the doing comes first—often all but immediately—and the thinking comes after. That in fact our thinking is affected, shaped, created by the doing.

I think this is why Jesus simply says, “Follow me.” Because it is in the doing, that we come to know what it means to be disciples, and because beginning with an elaborate explanation would not have any effect, would, in fact, be insensible, to us. “We’re not going to get it; we’re not wired like that,” a scientist might say, “that’s not going to change us.” Or, as a theologian might say, as Bonhoeffer did say, “Peter cannot convert himself, but he can leave his nets.”

Jesus does not ask of us an intellectual and emotional interior revolution, such is impossible for us. Only by the grace of God can that happen. Only by God is that possible. But Jesus does ask us for something else, that we can do: a step is required of us, a step out of the boat, a leaving of our nets, our old environments, entanglements. We cannot convert ourselves, our imaginations are too limited—but God is not; and God knows us, and so this is how God calls us: to take the step we can take, which we’ve been invited to take, to follow Christ, to be always on the trail of grace, to be where God has promised to be present, along with others, who are trying to follow, Simon and Andrew, James and John, me and you.

This sermon would probably have been more effective if it was shorter. I want to end it now with a saying, which you may heard, a saying about how, actually, we come to be followers, how disciples are formed, how faith passed along. It’s a saying that upends notions of cognitive precedence. It’s a saying that urges us to experience and share new life in Christ, not by imparting information, but by being present and active. It’s a saying that is particularly appropriate this day of fishing stories, and it’s short, too, it’s this: faith is not so much taught, as caught.