

“Answer the Phone that Rings”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

A number of years ago, a short notice appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education. It seems that a certain college was in the process of installing a new phone system. As the work was in progress, a memo was sent from the administration to all faculty and staff offices which read: “While the new phone system is being installed, you may find that you have two phones on your desk. Answer the one that rings.”

I have no idea why some administrator found it necessary to point this out. Still, it's good advice. Answer the phone that rings.

Somehow, Simon, Andrew, James and John knew to answer the phone and pick up Jesus' call. I wonder if we would do the same...?

After all, it's not as if these four guys were off having a picnic on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that day. They were at work and a fisherman's work was very hard. They worked year-round through heat and cold. They worked long hours, often through the night. They had to spend much of their time mending their nets. The nets, made of flax or linen, were carefully cleaned after a day in the water. Still, they rotted quickly and repair was an on-going project. Theirs was not a glamorous life nor an easy life. It was a way to make a living and always have a bit of something to eat.

The story says that when James and John left that day to follow Jesus' call, they left behind their father, Zebedee, with the boat and the hired men—which tells us that they were prosperous enough to have been able to hire a few day laborers to assist them in the work.

But why were they so ready to answer that “phone” when Jesus called?

There were fishing villages all along the Galilean seaside---Capernaum, Bethsaida, Magdala. Jesus spent time there. He was familiar with the lives of fishermen, just as he was with shepherds and farmers and carpenters. He knew their work and the challenges they faced. And he saw the larger picture as well.

The people in that region were living under the rule of the Roman government, namely, Pontius Pilate and King Herod. These are the people of whom the prophet Isaiah wrote: “land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, the people who sat in darkness.” It was there that Jesus begins his ministry. In the land of darkness.

The fishermen were poor and lived at a bare subsistence level. Everything was controlled and costly—fishing licenses, tolls on the roadways, taxes on the wood and flax they needed for their work. There was no “free market” as we might know it today. There was no “upward mobility.” There was no opportunity for entrepreneurship or getting ahead. Whatever little bit they earned was taken away by those who had power over them.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John. They yearned for a new life, for things to change. For a future bright with promise and hope.

Let's pause here for a moment. I know Advent and Christmas already seem like a long time ago as we race headlong into a new year, but let's think back for a moment to some of the Scriptures we heard during those weeks, Scriptures that tell the story, the meaning, and the purpose of Christ's birth.

Remember the Magnificat, Mary's song: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant, Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.”

Or remember the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined...For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken....For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests on his shoulders and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Those poor fishermen, like all the people of Galilee, and Nazareth, and Bethlehem, were waiting for the Messiah. They were longing for good news. They were waiting for his call. When it came, they answered. "Come, follow me," he said. It doesn't have to be like this. You are worthy. Each of you is a child of God, beloved of God. There is more, so much more for your life and for this world. Mine is a Kingdom of mercy, compassion, justice, and love. "Come, follow me."

Just as Jesus called those four fishermen, he calls us, too, by name, and looks us in the eye, and takes the measure of our heart and says: "Follow me." Your life is at stake. All life is at stake. The life of the planet is at stake. The lives of all my brothers and sisters are at stake. Follow me. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. "Come, follow me," he tells them, and we will fish for people. I want you to be part of living into my new Kingdom, using language you already speak, bringing who you are and what you know, the gifts you already have—to reach out and share this great good news with others so that God's light may shine in their places of darkness as well.

Jesus makes a radical claim on our lives for the sake of the Kingdom of God. He offers life. He asks much of us. Jesus calls us to be his followers, to fish for people, to touch their souls with love and grace and healing beyond their imagining.

What does it mean to answer his call, to be a follower of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life? What does it mean to be Christ's student, his witness, his servant, his advocate, his follower, his apprentice, his spokesperson, his ambassador, and his friend? What equips us, as people of faith, to persevere in, to witness to, to maintain God's radical hope through Jesus Christ...in a time such as this?

The headlines won't let up—racial tension, war, terrorism, climate change, refugees, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, fires, mudslides....God's people and God's creation are hurting, badly. This is mostly not new news nor is it good news. And that's precisely why God sent Jesus to be incarnate among us, to "pitch his tent among us" as one translation puts it, to usher in a new kingdom, a new beginning.

Jesus does not do things as leaders typically do. It was traditional for disciples to seek out teachers, or for military officers to commandeer recruits. In contrast, the very first thing Jesus does is to call followers to become part of something new and immediately empowers them to do the same, to invite more followers. Like a net, his is a net of relationships, people connecting with other people naturally, the people they see during the day, the people they pass, the people they work with, the people they know, and sharing with them something that will sound good to their ears and to their hearts and to their souls. Jesus, this divine free agent of mercy and grace, seeks to expand and deepen people's experience of God and God's promises through a new community of faithful living and speaking and healing that brings wholeness and joy and light.

This is why God creates the church. The church—the community, the net of faithful disciples who bear witness, who point to truth, who embody hope, who serve the least of the least, who persevere in prayer, who give generously, who are known by their love of one another and of all God's children, who defend the creation, who seek the paths of peace and justice.

In closing, I want to circle back around to our Covenant Renewal Service from New Year's Eve Sunday. Let's hear today's word of call in light of the covenant we have made to live as Christ's servant and follower. Remember from that service the first piece of counsel given to help us stay on the path. In the words of John Wesley: "First, set apart some time, more than once, to be spent alone before the Lord; in seeking earnestly God's special assistance and gracious acceptance of you..."

Set some time apart, each day, to be alone with God. We might say---time to listen for the call. Silencing our thoughts so that we are ready to hear that phone when it rings.

May the Psalmist's song be our own: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from the Lord, who alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress...On God rests my deliverance and honor...Trust in God at all times, O people..."

Let us listen – and answer the call.
Amen.

Notes:

Alice J. Batten. "Fishing Economy in the Sea of Galilee." bibleodyssey.org

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