



Sunday January 21, 2024
Luke 2:1-14 (Third Sunday after Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

What would make you drop everything and pursue an entirely different life? A great job offer? A fairytale marriage proposal? The adventure of a lifetime? The chance to do something unique and amazing? Or perhaps the opportunity to make a difference in another part of the world? What do you think – what might be so compelling that you would consider leaving everything you know to step out in service to something new; something different? What would make you do that?

Because that's essentially the scene that Mark describes in today's gospel, and I'm guessing that most of us would have a hard time imagining doing what those first disciples did. So, while most of us might admire what the disciples do, I think few of us would actually consider following their example finding it incredibly difficult to leave work and family and friends and all the rest to step into such an uncertain future.

Our gospel reading for today is a continuation of the story that we heard last week with the start of Jesus' ministry as he begins to call his first disciples. Last Sunday we heard Jesus call Phillip and Nathanael, and in today's story he calls four fishermen at the Sea of Galilee – Simon, Andrew, James and John.

And although we don't know exactly what it was about Jesus that led these first followers to just up and leave their homes and families to follow Jesus – whatever it was, was so compelling that it caused these and others to follow him into an uncertain future.

I'm always amazed that they would just follow Jesus with no idea where it would lead. And the gospel for today doesn't offer us anything to know what's going on inside their heads after receiving such a strange proposal. However, what we can say about this extraordinary call is that the kingdom of God has most definitely broken into their lives in the immediacy of Jesus' call.

Truthfully, I've always found this text to be both inspiring and frustrating. Inspiring because of the decisiveness and immediacy of the response from the four disciples we hear being called by Jesus. But I also find it a bit frustrating too because it seems to set the bar so incredibly high . . . *leave everything to follow a wandering preacher into an unknown future...and leave immediately...no thinking about it...no preparation. You're kidding, right?!*

And what strikes me most about the calling of these disciples isn't the "follow me," part – and not even the calling itself, but rather the immediacy of it all. "*Immediately they left their nets and followed him.*" So, as I struggle, and maybe you do too with this extraordinary act of faithfulness and try to rationalize the "immediacy" all we want – that that they saw something special in Jesus, or that this is all just part of Mark's overall gospel theme. I wonder if we might also consider asking ourselves, if the purpose Mark offers this story is to set an example for us – and if so, then what kind of example did he intend?

Because I suspect that we *are indeed* meant to find this story of disciples willing to unquestionably follow Jesus, inspiring. And yet I doubt that Mark imagined people following Jesus in quite the same way. What I mean by this is that he obviously knew that it was no longer possible for people to follow the historical Jesus in the same way these four early disciples did because that event had already come and gone. So perhaps Mark's message to those first century readers as well as all of us following along today – was more about following Jesus in general than it was about following him only by leaving everything we know to proclaim the coming kingdom of God.



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Except, that we can never follow Jesus “*in general*”. We follow him in particular and distinct ways that may or may not be like those first disciples. And *that*, I think, is the point. Perhaps we follow by becoming a teacher or volunteering at the local food pantry or homeless shelter. Maybe, we follow by looking out for those in our schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods who might be seen as outsiders and we take time to invite them in. Or we follow by doing a job that we really love as best we can in order to help others, or maybe it even means we follow by doing a job we dislike but it supports our family and helps others. Maybe we follow by being generous with our finances and our time, or we follow by taking time to listen to those around us and respond with care and encouragement. Or maybe it involves following by caring for an aging parent, or a special needs child, or someone who’s sick, or someone else who needs our compassion.

I think you get the idea. There are any number of distinct ways that we can follow Jesus, and indeed, follow him immediately – here and now, in this day and time in which we live. What seems to be at the heart of the matter is that we can follow Jesus in all of these different situations and circumstances precisely by trying to imitate him – by trying, that is, to treat everyone with the same respect, love and patience that he did, and especially those who have been overlooked by society.

This, I think, is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian – to try to live and treat others as Jesus did, embracing the values of inclusiveness, love, understanding, patience, forgiveness, and healing that he radiated in everything he said and did.

So, all this makes me wonder what our lives and our relationship with Jesus would be like if we opened ourselves to living in anticipation of the times and places where we might try to follow Jesus by treating others as we see Jesus treating people? What would our lives and our world be like if we actually chose to follow Jesus *immediately*? Because it seems to me that as we try to do this, then we’ll live more fully into and benefit more from the identity to which Jesus has already called us. The point isn’t simply about being “better disciples” but rather it’s about knowing and experiencing Jesus more deeply by following him.

Dear friends, Jesus calls us to love the ones in this world that nobody else will love. Jesus calls us to reach out to the lonely, the hungry, the sick, those in prison, the disabled, the abandoned, the needy, and to all who need to hear that someone *does in fact love them* – and that someone is Jesus. Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel that the kingdom of God was at hand...and he asks each of us to go into the world with that same message – the message of God’s overwhelming love for all God’s children.

The words of Jesus call out to each of us, and they come as grace filled words through the work of the Holy Spirit breaking into our lives, and through the Son of God whose tender words invite us to claim our lives as his beloved children. Jesus is calling us to a life of conviction, to a life of urgency, to a life of reaching out with his message of love and forgiveness to every single person we encounter in this life – and in doing so we become light for the world. But most of all, Jesus is calling us into a deep and rich relationship with the one who breathed life into our bones and calls us beloved. Jesus is calling...Follow me...so what are you waiting for? Thanks be to God. Amen.