

Gospel – Mark 1:14-20

After John had been arrested,
Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God:
"This is the time of fulfillment.
The kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent, and believe in the gospel."

As he passed by the Sea of Galilee,
he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea;
they were fishermen.
Jesus said to them,
"Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men."
Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.
He walked along a little farther
and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John.
They too were in a boat mending their nets.
Then he called them.
So they left their father Zebedee in the boat
along with the hired men and followed him.

Gospel Study – *Answer the Call*

One of the most exciting spiritual experiences I've had in the last few years was to walk along the Sea of Galilee—as we heard in today's Gospel—reading this very passage. I was walking along and reflecting on what it might have been like for Jesus to walk the same seashore and call forth disciples for the first time. In my mind I tried to reconstruct what it must've been like. This is the only place in all of Israel that's virtually the same as it was in Jesus' time. It continues to be pretty much like it was because it's not very developed along the perimeter of the sea. So, it was easy for me to imagine a picture of what it would've been like, especially since there were some fishermen out a few hundred yards in the lake.

As I reconstructed this in my mind, I kept thinking that I wish I could've been there back then, you know? I would have loved to be one of those fishermen that Jesus called forth. I would have loved to have dropped my nets—I don't care much about fishing to begin with so I would've dropped my nets—and I would have wanted to be one of those first disciples. As I was pondering all this in my heart, something very profound came to me. It came as often these moments of inspiration come, in a very quiet way. I don't want to make it overly dramatic, but you know when we are praying and sometimes that very still, small voice inside of us speaks—I trust that's how the Lord speaks to us. It's as though I heard Jesus say to me, "Jim, I have called you. You are my disciple. Come answer the call."

I was so sure in that moment of prayer, that that was the voice of the Lord speaking to me, calling me to be His closest disciple that honestly, I immediately fell down on my knees. I fell down on my knees because I felt first entirely unworthy, as any of us might feel to be called to

such a great life. At the same time, as unworthy as I felt I was, I was just as happy to be called. I thought, "What could be better?"

Well first, honestly, I looked around to see if anybody else was looking. I was pretty much alone at the time, at that moment, and so I lifted up my hands to offer my life to the Lord and I said, "Yes Jesus. Please take me. Please help me to follow you; to be faithful to this call to be your disciple." Before I had even stood up, I felt something else come to me by way more of intuition, kind of an inner sense of a continuation of this inner dialogue with the Spirit of God.

I felt my special call was to be what you've heard me say at times, like this little microphone—that literally means small voice—that I could be a small voice through which God can extend this same call to many more people. I prayed that I could be so. I stood up then and I felt so elated that I jumped up and started jogging down the seashore, thinking and feeling like I'd won my lottery for life. I thought, "It doesn't get any better than this: to be right here where Jesus called His first disciples and to feel as though I'm in the same good company. Ever since then, I can tell you that I've made a special study of this Gospel we are reflecting on today.

I'm so happy to share with you, because it's part of what I believe God has called me to do, to tell you how you too are called in the same way, but we all need to know what this means. We all need to listen to that voice, that hopefully you will hear in my speaking and extending this call, and know exactly what it may mean as it meant to those disciples.

To begin with, I'd like to suggest that here in the beginning of Mark's Gospel we have Jesus stating, in Mark's very words of the Gospel, the first priority for His ministry and the special strategy to achieve that priority. The priority was this: Jesus is given the grand and glorious mission to bring the Kingdom of Heaven here to Earth and so He says, "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand."

Now the time of fulfillment, you might know, goes way back to the promises that were made for a Messiah to come to usher in this great kingdom. You have to appreciate that this was first announced through Abraham almost 2000 years before Jesus. Imagine, all this time, the Jewish people were waiting that long. It's as long as when Jesus came to where we are now, they had been waiting that long for His coming. And Jesus, in His very person on this great mission that God had sent Him said, *The Kingdom is here. Here we go. Let's begin.*

The picture that comes to my mind is the beginning of the Olympics when the Olympic torch is lit: *Let the games begin!* Jesus lit that fire! Especially at first it is the fire of desire, to gather people who will share in this mission. Jesus says, "The Kingdom is here and now; the Kingdom of Heaven." What's the Kingdom of Heaven? Imagine what Heaven is like—I love to just imagine what Heaven is like. For some people it's golf, other people it's chocolate. For what we know Jesus to say, it's a feast of love. It's the perfect place of peace; no stress, no contention, no division. It's that place where there's perfect harmony and unity of all God's people. That is Heaven. And Jesus came to bring Heaven to Earth and Earth to Heaven. [He came] to raise us up to that high calling and so He announces, in His very person and given His divine mission: It has begun.

[But the mission still] needs to be worked out, and that's the whole point. He says (and this is the whole part of the strategy), "reform your lives and believe the Gospel." There is the theme sentence of Jesus' preaching. Every one of His sermons and homilies through the next few years would carry that theme. It would be at first a call to turn away from the evil ways of the world, the kingdom of the world. Reject that which is not of God; which is not loving; which is not justice; which is not truth or righteousness. Reject that and believe the Good News. Believe that God is with us and God will help us to experience His presence; which is another word for the Kingdom of God, or the Reign of God. [That is] where God reigns...where God is ever present... Where God is present, you have perfect peace and joy and love and all that is good.

So, Jesus comes as the herald. By the way, this word herald is a Greek word. It's used in this Gospel to refer to that person that was sent as a messenger from the front of the battle lines during war, back to the king to say that victory has been won. It was the herald that came by with that "evangelism;" that good news. So, Jesus is saying He is the one coming from the front lines of this battle against the devil, and all that is evil, to say: *Through the power of God, we have victory*. That's how we can say the Kingdom of Heaven has begun; it's just that the battle isn't over but we know with God on our side, who could be against us? He has overcome the power of evil, but still it's got to be worked out.

All that then is the background to setting, if you will, the goal. A great speaker and author—some of you are very familiar with him—Stephen Covey once said, "We always need to begin with the end in mind." That's great common sense that's not always so common. We tend to go about things just in the moment of what's most urgent instead of addressing what's most important. Jesus kept the goal in mind. His mission was to bring the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth. He's beginning with that goal in mind. Now, the next question is: What's the strategy to bring that about? His thinking was to call disciples because He's thinking about how God called the 12 tribes of Israel; starting in a small way and then that develops and works and grows and branches out. So Jesus, using that model of Israel, calls 12 disciples together.

I would like to give just a little background about discipleship in first century Palestine. What we have here is something that was very common among the practice of the rabbis of Jesus' day. They would gather together disciples who would join them and then learn from them by way of very close association. These disciples would spend time every day, much like our children might go to school and spend time all day with their teachers, and through that close association then they would learn all that they needed to learn. After a while they would then graduate. This is what Jesus is doing, only He is doing something a little distinct from the rabbis of His day. We see this in this call narrative.

Please understand that what we're reading is really what Scripture scholars tell us is an abridged version of what probably happened. In other words, it appears like Jesus came walking down the beach on the first day and saw somebody who looked like he could do. *Peter, Andrew... Come! Follow me!* And they said, 'Well who are you? Okay, we'll follow you.' It probably didn't quite happen so drastically as that. The scholars tell us that what happened with the early disciples is much like any relationship evolves. Gradually through first becoming acquainted with a person, you learn about them, you're introduced to them, you are attracted to them, and then there's this ongoing, growing knowledge and relationship, and then ultimately you make a commitment.

The evangelist is simply condensing this into what I might call a snapshot. A single picture that's preserved as an illustrative story so that the call story (the call of the first disciples), is a picture of the call of every disciple. We could look at this picture, here, and see how every Christian is called and how we all need to respond. It highlights the points that these Christian preachers through the years would talk about, how we all need to hear the call and answer the call of Christ.

With that in mind we then go to this Gospel where Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee, He observed Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea. He calls them, "Come. Follow me. I will make you fishers of men." It's fascinating to me that what is Jesus' first word to them? *Come*. To me that is Jesus' first word to all of us. *Come*. Jesus is so interested in us coming closer to Him. Wherever we are in our walk with the Lord, however deeply spiritual we may think we are, Jesus is still saying to us: *Come. Come even closer. Come and live an even deeper life in me. Come and make even a greater commitment to the life that I offer and to the work that I have for you. Come.*

Now what's interesting to note is that, different from the rabbis of His day, no rabbi called students to Himself. The students chose their rabbi, much like we would choose what school we may want to go to. Jesus, however, clearly took the initiative and He's the one who called forth the disciples. What's even more fascinating to me, given the fact that He made His own selection, you would think He would have been far more selective in choosing the best and the brightest; or, just saints and scholars. Right? I mean you would think that. Clearly that was not his criteria.

What He did is just chose common fishermen who were not known to be very educated. Not that they were un-educated, they were just the norm. And they were not known as saints. In fact Peter, in another Gospel says, "Lead me Lord. I am a sinner." They were not known as great leaders. In fact it's striking to me that Jesus didn't go to the synagogue to choose the holy people there. Or at least the academic circles, some of the rabbinical circles, but He didn't go there. He went to the common workplace. I think there's a powerful lesson here. Why did Jesus choose the ordinary people to do His extraordinary work? Maybe it's because, as so many of the Saints have taught us to know, it's the Lord's work and not ours.

I don't know about you, but it gives me great comfort to know Jesus chose the men that He chose. [He chose] the common people who all through their lives were noted for being slow learners. They never just got it immediately. They constantly fumbled and failed and struggled along the way. That's very encouraging to me. Don't you feel like you're in good company then? Don't you feel like you could qualify then for this call of Christ?

The second distinguishing fact of Jesus' way of discipling His followers is that the Jewish rabbis taught the students in the Torah, which as you know, is the first five books of the Bible. Torah is the Hebrew word for Law. They taught the Law and they transmitted this information *and* the art of interpretation. It was the rabbi's job to help these students learn how to know the Law and interpret it for other people, which was pretty much the job description of every rabbi. Now Jesus, His whole approach was a little different; not that He didn't teach information and not that He didn't teach a certain interpretation of God's Law, but He took it much further and deeper. His primary concern was not so much information but formation of these men. He's not so much

concerned about teaching the Law as transmitting a life so that they would actually incorporate and embody—incarnate like He—the very Spirit of the Lord so that others would see the sermon in them before they would hear it and then they would understand it. It's another story from St. Francis who once said to his brother Leo, "Let's go preach to the people in the town." They walked through all of Assisi and an hour or more later they came back to their Portiuncula where they had lived in the woods and Leo said, "I thought we were going to go preaching?" and St. Francis said, "Leo, don't you understand we did. We did by who we are, more than anything we could ever say."

This is what Jesus tried to convey and so He tried to form His disciples. Part of what He called them to was to become what? Fishers of men. What does that mean to be fishers of men? Just like Jesus was catching them, asking them, inviting them to a new life; the net, if you will, of God's kingdom or His church, so that one day they would be prepared to also be fishers of men and women; bringing others to the Lord.

Finally, the other distinguishing mark of Jesus' school of discipleship, was the fact that although the Jewish students would obviously, after a few years, graduate and be on their own moving away from the rabbi, Jesus made it a point always to convey that the Christian disciple never graduates. We never reach that point where we can stop learning and growing and we can never reach that point where we can move away from the master or our teacher. We would forever be called "disciple." It is very important to see that we need to stay in this committed relationship and have this ongoing learning process and part of that relationship is to each other. This is what Jesus is calling these first fishermen to.

We're told, then, that they immediately abandoned their nets and became His followers. That word "immediately" suggests that it was a very decisive moment; a very clear, unhesitating commitment to the Lord. Now, in fact, we know that they probably struggled a lot in answering His call. It wasn't as complete or committed as this one line would make it sound. That was their intention. That was what they wanted, but to live it out was a whole other thing. It's like us. We profess our faith in very concise, concrete terms with our lips but with our life it's another matter. What we're seeing here then is the evangelist is formulating the perfect picture of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, highlighting the cost of discipleship and what that entails. Once you make that commitment, then you learn what it really means.

I remember what my mom and dad taught me. When they first married they really didn't have a clue what they were getting into but they learned...quickly. I think that's true for all of us. You think you know, but you really don't. Even as a Christian, I'm still finding out what it really means to be committed to Christ; what it really means to be a priest. I'm sure you are in the same way as God has given you your specific, special call.

We're then told that Jesus proceeds a little farther and catches sight of two other brothers, James and his brother John and He calls them and they too leave their father Zebedee who was in the boat with the hired men. I think that's mentioned to let us know they didn't leave him altogether, you know that father and son business—now the son split to leave dad doing all the work by himself—but that there were some men to carry on the work. It does give the impression that they abandoned their families, doesn't it? And abandoned their work altogether.

Again, I think we need to see this in a certain light. The abandonment is an interesting concept. What did that mean? Well, if it meant they left their families altogether then this is a curious afterthought. Two paragraphs later, Peter had left his family but, do you know, he's leading Jesus back to his home to heal his mother-in-law? I figure if he left his family don't you think he'd leave his mother-in-law? The point is, as we hear from people who have a spiritual conversion, we heard Ray speak some weeks ago, He said, "I used to put my work first, my family second and God third." Maybe that's how most people live their lives. Maybe that's how Peter, James and John and Andrew lived their lives?

Jesus walked into their life and just changed all that around. Jesus came first; secondly their family and thirdly their work responsibility. In fact, we know they carried on their fishing to some extent. We'll see them later on fishing again. We know in fact scholars tell us that Jesus moved in with Peter's family in Capernaum. So what do we mean they abandoned Him? Well, I think they had to abandon what? They had to abandon their sense of control of their life. Up to that point, I like to think of this (this is my interpretation) Peter was his own man. In fact, what I learned when I studied him is that he probably owned a very prosperous business. He had his brother Andrew working for him; possibly several other people; possibly Zebedee's sons, James and John and their father as well. He called his own shots.

I tell the story, you remember how we played Simon Says years ago? Simon says, "Put your hand on your head." You put your hand on your head. If Simon didn't say it, you didn't do it. Simon played "Simon Says" all through his life up to this point. What he said, people did, and he did. If Simon didn't say it, you didn't do it. He was in control up until now and Jesus changed that and Simon had abandoned his own control of his own life. From then on, he had to follow the leader. Don't you think that was difficult for Simon? That's why at times he's arguing with Jesus: "No, you don't want to go to Jerusalem. You don't want to take the cross."

"Satan get behind me," Jesus said.

So, clearly what's highlighted in this Gospel is the abandonment. I like to think of the word call, you know, as an acronym. First, *Come*. But second, *Abandon*... You gotta let go. You gotta let go of your life, your plans, if you want to follow the leader. That's what it means to follow. In other words, the most important question is no longer what do you want to do? But what does God want you to do? Now try that one on. You'll be abandoning yourself all day long you know what I'm saying? Abandoning yourself to God; surrendering. That's letting go of the net, that security net.

Psychologists say we all live in a certain comfort zone. We get accustomed to certain things in our life and we like it this way. We worked out a way to get along and Jesus disrupts all that. He calls us out of this comfort zone and calls us to change and it's very disruptive and it feels like a sacrifice. In fact, that's what we must do in order to follow. We sacrifice ourselves, our will, to follow whatever Jesus wills, wherever He leads us.

This is a beautiful call we're being given, but remember that, if I continue, that word call is to *Come*, and then *Abandon* and then to *Learn* because a disciple constantly learns. We're constantly learning what the Lord wants, constantly learning what He's asking and then to live or

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to love which is what His mission is that we're given. Amazing that these disciples, imagine, were to share in the very work of Jesus of saving the world.

Could you imagine, they would not have had a thought, they couldn't have dreamt how powerful their ministry was going to be. Think of it, that we are here today as a result of those 12 that first answered that call. It's amazing to think about. Now keep thinking about that as you consider this thought: I think Jesus is calling you and me, right here, right now. We're not far from the sea of Galilee. His call is being given even as I speak.

We know that Jesus chose 12 men. But we know, and I make this a point, He chose quite a few other disciples who were men and women. That's extraordinary for those days for women were not disciples. Women weren't encouraged to read or study the Torah, but Jesus included them in His company. They weren't in the twelve that we have named, but certainly in the wider circle and He uses them in the ministry. I believe with all my heart, you are His disciples today. Do you believe that? And, as His disciples, are you ready to answer the call? Amen.