

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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JANUARY 25, 2009



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Mark 1:14-20 **"Come, Follow Me"**

"Come, follow me." These are three simple words from Jesus that mark the beginning of his ministry. Were they meant as an invitation?, a command?, or maybe even an admonishment? I suspect they were meant as if from a loving parent who reaches out to a child and says, "Come, follow me." But before we probe this critical point in the life of Jesus, let's get some of the facts: when?; who?; where?; and why?

When? The Gospels tell us that Jesus of Nazareth is now about 30 years old and we know that he has spent time in the desert, both before and after baptism by John. We suspect he spent years (perhaps) learning from the desert ascetics like John, who would have been the most likely source of education. We really do not know. History tells us that at this time the Roman Empire is strong and King Herod Antipas is the client tetrarch of Galilee and Perea.

Who? To whom is Jesus calling, "come, follow me."? Not to an illustrious group of intellectuals, purveyors of power, investment bankers, "movers & shakers", rather Jesus had a decidedly blue collar audience, working-class, simple people, with little (or no) formal education, mostly married men of the same age and background as himself.

Where? Where does Jesus launch his ministry?, from Jerusalem, seat of civic power and the Temple cult?

No, rather Jesus sets out from the liminal margins of the Empire. We find Jesus walking beside the Sea of Galilee, a "marginal" zone of Palestine in which outcasts, bandits, prostitutes, the sick and dispossessed find refuge is exactly where Jesus our Lord made his early way as a minister. Left behind are the desert's ascetics that roamed even these marginal areas, intentionally avoided are the seats of Caesar's world.

Why? Why did they follow the one who said simply, "Come, follow me."? What makes a married, uneducated fisherman like Simon-Peter leave the life he had come to know as his own to follow and obscure 30-year old, self-described prophet from Nazareth? It is a prime question. Was it some physical beauty? I suspect not, Jesus was in many respects what we might call "unremarkable" based upon Scripture. Our adoration of Jesus Christ spills out into art and sculpture perhaps idealizing his true physical beauty. Maybe Jesus was a compelling orator and prophet? As true as we know this to be retrospectively, Jesus had not yet preached to those he called forward to come. No sermon, no prior notice, no "miracles", and yet come and follow Jesus they did.

There have been other prophets before and after Jesus who brought the message of God to humankind. All had followers, those who followed had the

benefit of months of discourse, sometimes years. What was it about Jesus? Why would this have never worked for our other beloved prophets? Not for Adam, Seth, Enoch, and Noah; not for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; not for Moses, Joshua, Nehemiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah; and Ezekiel; not for Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zechariah, and Malachi; not for St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, Pope John XXIII, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King Jr., not for Buddha and Mohammed (peace be upon him), no not for any other would there be this luminous spiritual draw, **for Jesus was not only delivering the message of God, Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord.**

What did Jesus promise his early disciples? The Gospels of Matthew and of Mark tell us that Jesus said, "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men". This was their "calling" from Jesus, but what was the content of Jesus' message that sustained the new and few disciples at first? Into Galilee Jesus went, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Here, as we ponder the Scriptures closely we sense two characteristics of the message of God from Jesus, (i) a new age has come and (ii) there is an "urgency" palpable in his words. So, to recap: it was the divinity of our Lord Jesus that compelled the newly acquainted to detach themselves from their existing lives and world and respond to Jesus' "Come, follow me". Dropping their nets, they followed the young man from Nazareth, for Jesus is the Lord. His promise was for a new way, a new life, one made possible and urgent because the kingdom of God has drawn near.

What does Jesus promise us today in 2009? In many ways, we are so much like the early disciples, we wait at the beckoning call of Jesus "Come, follow me", we are perplexed, we are resistant, and often we are anxious. Unlike the early disciples, we have scriptures (Hebrew Bible, Gospels, Paul's letters, and more) and we benefit from nearly two millennia of human knowledge of Jesus. In their time there were 12, in our time there are 2.4 billion followers of Jesus Christ. But let's stay on track and keep focused on what is it does Jesus our Lord promise to us today? Let's just focus on **4** common elements of that which Jesus promises us now, as he did then, to the early disciples.

#1. Abandon the world of Caesar, approach the kingdom of God for "the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Jesus' message was radical then, radical now. We cannot find answers to life's daunting questions at the door of the Empire, rather we must enter the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ to seek answers, solace, love, forgiveness, and God's grace. The numbers speak for themselves, today alone 2.4 billion Christians have been "called", but do we really fully respond when Jesus calls to us, "Come, follow me."?

#2. Jesus offers us miracles. Now this response might seem to some of us more of a hope than a promise, and refers us back to an earlier point in our discussion about how the first disciples are called. There has been no theology of Jesus professed, no Sermon on the Mount, no prior notice, and no miracles. But in truth, the disciples share (as do we in 2009) in the most powerful of all miracles through Jesus, *i.e.*, the miracle of our faith. It is this miracle we sense when our imperfect lives seems almost hopeless, when the chaos and inability of us to gain control

of our lives seems near a breaking point, when our health suffers, our relationships falter, and faith in ourselves becomes fragile. Look here is this beautiful sanctuary, look into the faces of those to either side of you, look into the faces of those in front of you, we are all sharing the miracle of our faith in God through Jesus Christ. We are experiencing right now, here in this sanctuary, the same miraculous power that Simon-Peter, Andrew, James, and John and all the early disciples felt. Embrace and nurture this sense, it is for each of us our bond of faith with Almighty God, with our spiritual cores, and with each other, people sharing a love of God through Jesus.

#3. The power of God creates in us faith, i.e., a new way of being.

"Repent and believe the good news!" Jesus tells us in Matthew and Mark. The power of God, as professed so well by Paul in his letter to the Romans, is justification by faith, in which we "right" ourselves with God, adjusting the trajectory, the pitch, the attitude, the yaw of our selves (like a space shuttle) towards our ultimate goal, i.e., being right with God. The psalmist in Psalm 62:6-7 captures from the Hebrew Bible what we sense:

God alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress;
I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

#4. Jesus calls us to God from the liminal, rough edges of life, our Galilee, our marginalized everyday lives. The truth is that we are all marginalized by life's sometimes harsh realities:

We are marginalized by the poverty of spirit: who among us does not feel the sagging of spirit that accompanies the post-holiday season. We are having a cold, icy winter, when the darkness comes early, getting around is a challenge, and a look back on our lists of things we hoped to nourish our Spirit in the "Holy Days", somehow were lost to the "holidays". But yet, in this despair, if we can pick up our heads from our hands and open our ears we can hear Jesus saying to us, just as he did to Simon-Peter, "Come, follow me."

We are marginalized by the poverty of health: the last few months have been particularly hard on many members of our congregation. Many of us have lost the health that we took for granted, many have witnessed the decline in health and sometimes death of our loved ones, for others it is the long wait for tests, for diagnoses, for therapies (if available), for medications (if affordable), and for a sign of some improvement in a severe illness. Our cousin Helen Chang in California was diagnosed with stage 2 stomach cancer last week. And we thank God for that 1 chance in 5 that she can survive it, and that's only if the chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and surgery go "well". Confronting those odds, we can pick up our heads from our hands and open our ears, we can hear Jesus saying to us, just as he did to Simon-Peter, "Come, follow me."

We are marginalized by the poverty of love: although it might be seasonally adjusted, human relations are just very hard for all of us. Our relationships, affairs of the heart, family interactions, marriages, divorces, separations grip us with a visceral quality just as profound as the love that begets their messy nature. But, we learn patience, forgiveness, and understanding from Jesus. He tells us of

the profound love of God for us, His treasured but stiff-necked earthly creatures. If God can forgive us and Jesus can redeem us, who are we to hold love hostage in our own relationships to some level greater? When our hearts are broken, we pick up our heads from our hands, wipe away each others' tears, and open our ears, we can hear Jesus saying to us, just as he did to Simon-Peter, "Come, follow me."

We are marginalized by the poverty of our faith in Almighty God:

how can we not be moved by the witness of our fellow congregants? We are here in this sanctuary, called into the presence of God, not because our lives are ever brimming with gladness, but because sometimes they are filled with sadness. Jesus our Lord walked the face of this Earth to experience not just the gladness (and there was much gladness in his message and in his manner), but to experience the everyday despair and sadness that can creep into anyone's life. We are truly blessed by our very breath of life on this crisp Sunday morning in 2009. To restore our faith in God we must return to words of one of very few prophets who graced the Earth in my lifetime, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who wrote:

"Jesus promises us a kingdom, a new and decisive way to live according to the will of God."

"Now," he said, "*Now* let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter--but beautiful--struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the [children] of God, and our brothers [and sisters] wait eagerly for our response" (from "*A Time to Break Silence*").

Stop, listen carefully, hear Jesus saying to us, just as he did to Simon-Peter, "Come, follow me."

Let us pray.