

“When Jesus says to follow”

Mark 1:14-20

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So much happened when Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee and called four fishermen to follow him. Those who answer the call and follow discover three separate realities that are all joined together in this one man named Jesus. Following Jesus Christ we discover God’s actions for us, God’s actions to us, and God’s actions with us.¹

In Jesus Christ God acted for us. There is something tender in how we see God act for us in Jesus. We see the compassion Jesus had for the leper and for the hungry crowds. We see his concern for the lame and lost. We see his love for widows who give with great sacrifice their two small coins. But the gospels reveal so much more than the tenderness of God’s actions. The gospels reveal a terrible truth. There is a gulf separating human beings from God, a gulf that was caused by a rebellion that began way back in the garden with our first parents Adam and Eve and a rebellion that has been carried on by all who have been born of Adam. Paul sums that rebellion up in Romans 3 by saying, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” We who follow Jesus will see his tenderness, and his tenderness is beautiful and becoming of God’s Beloved Son. But we will also see the terrible consequences of the sinfulness of humanity. To truly be for us, Jesus will have to suffer and die on the cross. I am currently reading through the four gospels, and each one offers a unique view on the life of Jesus. But each gospel points clearly to the cross as the goal toward which Jesus is headed. When Jesus dies, he does much more than lift up a heavy wooden cross. He lifts up on his shoulders the sin of humanity and he carries those sins away.

Those who follow Jesus will inevitably find themselves at the foot of the cross, watching as he suffers and dies. Dear friends, pay close attention to the cross. From a human perspective, it is a terrible tragedy. From God’s perspective it is an atoning sacrifice. We are told in II Corinthians 5:19 that on the cross, “God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us.” “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:6-8) “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.” (I Peter 3:18) When Jesus said follow me to those fishermen years ago, he was inviting them to come and see how great the love of God is. Jesus himself would lay down his very own life so that those four fishermen, and so many more, could find eternal life. In Jesus Christ we see God’s actions for us.

We also find in Jesus Christ God’s actions to us. God’s actions in Jesus affect not only the course of our lives for all eternity, but God’s actions in Jesus Christ also do something to us. When we follow Jesus Christ we find that our lives change. The New Testament speaks in terms of there being a new creation in Jesus Christ, the old passes away and the new comes. God is doing something to us. We hear that we die to the old self and a new self is born. God is doing something to us. God’s action for us is known in theological terms as justification. God’s actions for us are a free gift, and have nothing to do with anything we bring to the table. It is by faith in God’s actions for us in Christ that

¹ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV.1, p. 527.

we are saved, and not by any works that we do. God's action to us is known in theological terms as sanctification, being made holy.

So when Jesus calls disciples to follow him, we find ourselves on a journey where our lives are being shaped by him, transformed by him, made new by him. He wants to shape us into people who trust him completely. He wants to shape us into people who are filled with compassion. He wants to shape us into people whose lives are marked by prayer and a deep spirituality. He wants to shape us into a people who forgive. There are strong forces working against all of this, forces within and forces without. His authority over the demons and things that destroy demonstrates his ability to call us out of lifestyles that are self-sufficient and self-centered and at times self-destructive into lives of service and sacrifice. This is all part of the God who acts to us. When people follow Jesus he shapes them into his own image.

Many of Paul's letters begin by recounting how God has acted for us and then move to calling us to be shaped by God's actions to us. In Galatians Paul fights tooth and nail to make sure everyone clearly understands the good news of the gospel is all about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and not what we have done in following the law. And then he spells out what God is doing to us, as he speaks of those who are filled with the Spirit of God. Our lives bear the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In Ephesians 2 he writes those powerful words that tell us we have been saved by grace, and grace alone, no works on our part, only God's actions for us. And then the call comes to let God do his work to us, helping us live lives worthy of this great calling we have received. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another...put off your old self and be made new in the attitude of your minds; and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness...Be imitators of God and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us." Colossians celebrates the cosmic Christ through whom God has reconciled all things to himself, and then the call comes to live as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. Paul writes, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

It wouldn't be honest to talk about God's actions to us without mentioning the letter to the church in Rome, where in the seventh chapter Paul makes clear the struggle it is to live as a new creation in Christ. The great Apostle of the faith writes, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." When God acts to us we often do not see steady progress on our part. In fact, sometimes we do not feel like we are making any progress. But Romans 8 follows Romans 7 and assures us that we are not alone in this struggle. It is God whose actions are to us, whose actions shape us, whose actions transform us. We are controlled by the Spirit, and "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you." All of this is so important to keep in mind when you hear Jesus call to those first disciples and say to them, "Repent." To repent is to turn, to go in a new direction, to follow a new path, to live a new life. Because Jesus is the one who calls, we are assured that with God's actions to us we can embark on a new course in life.

And when Jesus Christ calls those fishermen to follow him, we find that God's actions are with us. The gospels hold out the cross and empty tomb as God's actions for us. The gospels hold out the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as God's actions to us.

And the gospels hold out the mission to the world as God's actions with us. "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Jesus will be with us as he sends us into the world on his mission. How important it is for the church to be reminded time and again that Jesus calls us to be fishers of men, excuse the exclusive language. We who are called, we who are disciples, are ones who have been given a mission. As early as the third chapter in Mark Jesus is giving his disciples authority and sending them to preach and drive out demons. In chapter six he sends them out again, and out they go, preaching that people should repent. They also drove out many demons and anointed sick people with oil and healed them. When the crowds were hungry Jesus said to his disciples, "You feed them." After Jesus washed the feet of his disciples he said, "Now you do the same thing for others." The gospels all end not with the resurrection, but with some sort of sending, some sort of sending on the mission, which is proclaiming the hope and salvation of Jesus Christ. A recent study of evangelism we did here at Pines had the wonderful phrase that our mission is to reach as many people as possible as often as possible in as many ways as possible. We don't do this alone. The Jesus who calls us and sends us is the Jesus who goes with us. But send us he does. "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men."

Here in this little passage of Scripture with Jesus and some fishermen we find that Jesus Christ is calling us to a life that will lead us into a life changing relationship with the God who acts for us, to us, and with us. Surely there is more going on in the lives of the disciples than we can gather from this reading, but the image of people who hear Jesus call and whose response is immediate and urgent is one that has stirred other disciples throughout the ages to ask, "What does it mean for me to follow Jesus?" "What does it mean for us to put our lives in the hands of the God whose actions are for us, to us, and with us?"

These last two weeks have given me an extended opportunity to think about this Jesus who calls us to follow him. When Jan Stone, Julie's mother, died last week, I was thinking long and hard about what it means to put our lives in the hands of Jesus, to leave our nets and our boats and all that is safe and secure, all for the sake of following Jesus. I found it interesting that as I was trying to focus on the life Jan Stone lived, God kept interrupting me with the stories of people other than Jan. We were back in Sacramento when Jan died and then the whole week leading up to her memorial service. We served the Fair Oaks church in Sacramento for ten years in the 1980's, and in the time surrounding Jan's death and the memorial service, we reconnected with many very dear friends. These are all friends who in one way or another have heard Jesus say, "Follow me."

There was the man who struggled to find the joy in life, not truly convinced of the value and worth his life held. I longed for this friend to see himself with the eyes of Christ, to let Christ take whatever it was that was holding him back and set him free. This man, this friend, walked into the waiting room the day Julie's mom died and he was a different man. His countenance had changed. There was light and life in his eyes, a smile on his face, and deep concern and compassion in every word he said. Later that week, I sat with him, and this man told me his journey to wholeness, and it was every bit as powerful as the miracles in the New Testament. God's actions to him set him free and filled him with joy and hope and a new sense of purpose. Later he sent me this note. "Thank you for making me feel so loved, forgiven, and accepted." Those are kind words,

but we all know it is Jesus who has helped this friend to find love, forgiveness, and acceptance. That is who stands on the seashore and calls to us, "Come, follow me."

My friend Dale came by to visit after Jan died. I have told you about Dale and how he got involved going on mission trips to an orphanage in Mexico. He started in 1987 and he is still going down there. Dale understands God's actions with us. Dale understands missions. Dale understands being a fisher of men. Over these 25 years Dale has recruited and involved countless people on the mission trip to that orphanage, and in his spare time he has traveled all the way from California to New Orleans to help in the Katrina recovery efforts. It just about made my heart melt when Dale said, "I still remember that day in 1987 when you stood up and told the church we were going to Mexico and we needed people to come and serve the Lord. I remember exactly where I was sitting when you gave that invitation." I bet Peter and Andrew and James and John could take us back and show us exactly where their boats were docked when Jesus called them. And Dale said the same thing. "I remember exactly where I was." When Jesus calls you to follow he leaves a mark on your life that you will never forget. And friends, he leaves a mark you will never regret.

During our time we met a friend going through breast cancer, and please don't take this as a pun, because it really isn't, but she radiates faith and trust and confidence in Jesus Christ. "Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him, how I've proved him o'er and o'er. Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus, O for grace to trust him." Two kids in our youth group grew up, fell in love, got married, and now the wife has heard God calling her to take a stand against the whole human trafficking problem. With the major highways running through Sacramento, it is a center of human trafficking. She worked with some friends on an event that raised \$100,000 to help fight human trafficking.

What struck me in each of these encounters was how similar they are to the encounters I have with you here at Pines. Like my friend who struggled to find his worth in life, you have let Christ reach into the depths of your souls, the insecurities, the struggles, the doubts, the dark places, and you are constantly letting Christ do a new thing in your life. Like my friend Dale you listen for the call of Jesus as he sends you into the world as fishers of men. Today's bulletin tells of a group of 44 medical missionaries who have traveled to Guatemala. That group is led by our own Phil and Linda Johnson. Larry Shamp and Jim and Anne Beall are on the trip. What they are doing is not unique to them. So many of you have embraced the call to go into the world, going where there are needs and hungers and longings. Some here are going through cancer, and your lives radiate faith and trust and confidence in Jesus Christ. And many here share a concern for human trafficking. What a blessing to know that God continues to act for us, and to us, and with us, through his Son Jesus Christ.

In the midst of all this, we spent time remembering the life of Jan Stone. Jan's whole life was spent following Jesus as he gave his life for her on the cross. Her life was spent embracing God's actions to her as he did that shaping and molding we call sanctification. And her life was spent serving and sharing in the name of the God who acts with us to bring healing and hope to the world. You must know that our hearts were broken and there was deep sadness in her death. But there was something deeper than sadness and more powerful than death at work.

At the memorial service Julie shared a story about Alex, our youngest. When Alex was finally old enough to go to kindergarten, we were excited to take him to school

on his first day. We looked for him, but found he had walked out to the bus stop. That is what he had seen his older siblings do, and now he lined up to catch the bus. Julie ran out and said, "Alex, we want to drive you to school on your first day." He looked at her and said, "I've been waiting my whole life to ride the bus." If you know Alex, you know that he rode the bus that day.

When Julie finished telling that story she said that as her mom lay dying, she knew something more than death was taking place. Julie said, "My mom has been waiting her whole life to see Jesus. She has been waiting her whole life to see Jesus, and now, she sees him face to face. And she is hearing him say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.'"

That is an incredible affirmation of faith. I guess the only thing I would say is that Jan did not spend her whole life waiting. She spent her whole life following. And that is the invitation that is extended to us this very morning. Jesus, God's Beloved Son, is calling you and me to come and follow. Follow him and find the God who is acting for us, to us, and with us. Follow him and find hope. Follow him and find purpose. Follow him and find life, both now and forevermore.