

“Immediately They Followed”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Mark 1: 14-20**

As a child, one of the things I looked forward to the most was going to my grandparents’ home in Mississippi. They lived about twenty miles south of Vicksburg on a large lake, about a five-minute drive from the Mississippi River. Other than the usual things you look forward to as a child going to your grandparents’ house, the main activity at their house was fishing. All eight grandchildren – boys and girls – learned how to fish from my grandfather, and it was what I always looked forward to doing since I couldn’t go fishing where my parents and I lived.

In the spring and summer we would fish from the banks of the lake and in the boat which my grandfather steered. In the fall and winter, we would fish from the docks under which the fish would congregate to stay warm. There were many tall tales which us cousins would tell, and there was an excitement and anticipation of what might happen which always preceded my going to Mississippi and the chance to go fishing.

Perhaps that’s because with fishing, you never know what may happen on any given day. As many of you know from your own experience, some days the fish are biting, and some days all you catch out on the water is a good sunburn. I remember the day that my grandfather and I went out in the boat, and I managed to catch all four types of fish that were stocked in that lake. That was a great day! Somehow, I’ve managed to block out all the bad days of fishing, when I didn’t catch anything, which I’m sure outnumbered the good ones.

I have always been amazed at those who make a profession out of fishing. It involves long, difficult hours of labor to set the lines, and then wait to see if their catch will be worth all their labor. They work in pouring rain, wind, and cold, but all with the hope that a specific trip will reap enough of a reward at market to provide for them and their families for months to come.

If you think about it, there are two very important traits which you must have in order to enjoy and be successful at fishing. First, you must be extremely patient. Patient to the point that day after day you may go out on the water and not catch a thing, but always willing and able to go out the next time, knowing that they may start biting then. Second, you must be ready to act when the time does come. You have to be alert and responsive to any little motion on your line. When a bite comes your way, you can’t pull on the pole too strong or too weak. Once you have the fish, you have

to know how to gradually guide it back to you, and eventually into the boat or your net. For those of us who don't fish on a consistent basis, patience and readiness are two things which quickly evaporate when the fish aren't biting. But for the experienced fisherman, these are traits which never leave, and allow one to be successful.

To enjoy fishing as a hobby and recreation is one thing. To fish everyday of your life because that is your livelihood, well, that's something else altogether.

Imagine what it was like for Simon and Andrew, James and John. Patience had to be one of their most important qualities, as they would stand day after day and cast their nets into the sea. The days would have been long and hard, either filled with much excruciating labor of hauling nets full of fish, or tedious boredom when nothing would happen for hours upon hours. Yet this was their way of life, likely taught to them by their fathers, their uncles, and their grandfathers. They knew no other way of living other than getting into the boat and searching the waters for fish. When bad days seemed to pile on top of one another, it must have felt like there was no way of escaping from this way of life. Yet if they ever did escape, then what would they do? This was all they knew, and to do anything else would seem out-of-this-world, to say the least.

Why, then, did Jesus begin his ministry by calling these humble fishermen to be his first disciples? Of all the people in Galilee, why did he walk along the sea and chose these four men to begin a following which one day would include millions and millions of people? Why would the first disciples be fishermen?

Mark doesn't say in his brief account. Mark usually doesn't explain a lot of things, since Mark is the shortest of the four gospels. But what Jesus says resonates with me. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (1:17). In the same way they went about their lives as fishermen, Jesus wanted these four men to pursue a way of life not unlike their current one, but with a different goal and purpose. Instead of casting their nets to see what a day's wage would bring, he invites them to cast a different kind of net into the sea of humanity, which he will help them to tend and pull in as they "fish for people."

And if you think about it, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ requires the two traits which I spoke of earlier concerning the art of fishing. There is a tremendous amount of patience involved. We must be patient with ourselves, to wait expectantly to hear the call which God issues to us. We must be patient with God, especially when things don't seem to be happening at the pace we would like for them to take place. We must be patient with other people, for the call to know God takes its own unique time in each individual. For some it may be weeks, for others it may be

years, but for all people, we must be willing to be patient and know that the Spirit is working in its own sweet time.

And as we said before, as a disciple of Jesus Christ we must be in a state of readiness to act at the appropriate time. Not to pull too hard and not to give too much space, but to recognize when someone is being led to God and to then act as a friend, a teacher, or a guide to further develop their relationship with God and Jesus Christ. Too often we may not be paying attention when someone comes forward, or too often we may pull too hard too early, and they are driven away from the church for fear of being pressured. It is not an easy thing to judge when and how to act if someone appears ready to come forward as a believer. But perhaps the most important thing is to remain alert and aware, so we don't miss such opportunities when they present themselves.

But think back again to the two sets of brothers by the Sea of Galilee. After years of fishing, all of the sudden they pick everything up and follow Jesus. There was no promise of job security or lodging or food, just "Follow me." There was no indication of what they would have to do, just "Follow me." There was nothing which said this would be an improvement over their current livelihood, just "Follow me." What was it about Jesus' call that caused these four men to leave everything behind and follow him?

All we know from Mark's account is what they did, and that was to drop their nets, get out of the boat, and immediately follow him. Jesus' call was not something they hesitated about, not something which they asked him if they could have a day or two to think about. Instead they left what they were doing and followed him. Obviously, his call had a significant degree of authority to it, one which the fishermen did not dispute and answered immediately. He doesn't compete with their personal interests, with other teachers' ideas or methods to attract people. He doesn't have to market his message in a package which is so common in our churches today, which find themselves in our consumer society. Jesus didn't have to sell his message - he didn't have to play by such rules (Texts for Preaching, Yr.B, 123).

And even though they immediately followed Jesus, Simon, Andrew, James, and John aren't immediately given a perfect faith by Jesus' summoning of them at Galilee. Throughout the rest of his ministry, they are among those who do not understand his teachings, who act confused, and who he will rebuke on many occasions for their lack of faith. Instead, they act in faith by responding to a call from the outside which they feel compelled to follow, a call which leads them away from their past and into a new and uncertain future.

In our Reformed Tradition, when we talk about a call to ministry or service, we often speak of two forms of the call: an inner call and an outer

call. The inner call is something which you alone hear in your heart as God's voice speaking to you. The outer call is a confirmation of your inner call which comes from the community of faith of which you are a part. The inner call must be present with the outer, and vice versa, or else there is no authentic call by God.

I remember as a youth and college student, I had plenty of signs of the outer call to ministry. People saying I was a chip off the old block, that I would follow in my father's and grandfather's footsteps and carry on the family business, as it were. I certainly had the skill set to be a minister, and had plenty of opportunities to receive that affirmation of an outer call by the community of faith.

But I struggled to hear clearly that inner call of God's voice. How was the voice of God distinct from the voice of friends, family, church members, and so on? I remember clearly feeling like I needed to get away from the norm so that I could hopefully hear that inner call clearly. Spending a semester of my junior year of college in Scotland gave me that space and opportunity. I don't recall a specific moment of revelation of hearing God's voice. I would instead say I was at peace, setting my sights toward seminary and serving in the church. That helped me hear clearly the affirmations of the outer call by mentors, friends, and others.

The other reason I felt at peace about that decision is that I never felt any form of pressure by my family to pursue ministry, including my father. He and I would joke that this vocation is like a curse in our family - me being the fifth-generation Presbyterian minister. But it's not a curse; it's a blessing. And that's because of the space and time and opportunity I've been given to allow the Spirit's leading in my life of discernment for vocation and purpose as a child of God.

I would hope that one of the church's chief purposes is to be a space for everyone to discern, hear, and follow the call of God to them in Jesus Christ. That the church would be a space for people to listen for the inner call of service - in whatever vocation they are called to lead. That the church would be a place for people to hear their outer call from God - to receive feedback, guidance, and instruction in loving and constructive ways. That the church would be a place where everyone believes their light is a gift from God and thus needs to shine before others so that all in this world might know the depth of God's love for them in Jesus Christ.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (1:15). Our Lord is calling to us on the lakeshore - "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Let us answer his call immediately, so that his kingdom might be known in all the earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.