

Called For - The Summons

Mark 1:14-20

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There are still a few reminders of Christmas around – the snow, and driving around at night I see here and there the twinkling lights that have yet to be taken down, and now and then I see a bedraggled, former, Christmas tree on the side of the road bereft of ornaments and waiting to be hauled away.

You won't find bedraggled Christmas trees or left over Christmas lights in Mark's Gospel because he doesn't even have a birth story. No Bethlehem, no shepherds, no Magi, no angels. No young couple with pre-wedding problems. No baby. When Mark begins his telling of the story Jesus has long since crawled out of the manger and is long past diapers and swaddling clothes. He's already found his voice and he is loose in the world.

You know, we are pretty comfortable with Jesus at Christmas: weak and silent. Several pastor friends kept insisting that I "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby." In this movie Will Ferrell plays the role of Ricky Bobby, the most successful driver on the NASCAR circuit.

But Ricky Bobby has these fatal flaws--he's just morally and ethically bankrupt. The only things that matter to Ricky Bobby are winning races and self-indulgence. My friends wanted me to see this movie for this particular scene that is hilarious and reveals a tragic truth. The family is gathered around the table and Ricky Bobby prays. Throughout his prayer Ricky Bobby prays to "Lord Baby Jesus."

Ricky Bobby's wife and his father-in-law interrupt him: "You do realize that the Baby Jesus grows UP!" And Ricky Bobby says, "Listen, you can pray to any Jesus you want to. You can pray to the teenage Jesus, you can pray to the adult Jesus, I don't care! But in this house we like the baby Jesus and all his magic, baby powers and swaddling clothes."

Perhaps the writers of Talladega Nights spent some time in church, because they really did get that part right. We do like baby Jesus. And I have the crèches to prove it. Baby Jesus is cute, babies are cute. You can pick them up, cuddle them and when you put them down – they stay put! But the Incarnate Word is not going to remain weak and silent.

Perhaps that is why Mark's gospel skips the birth narrative – Mark is more interested in what the Word made flesh will say and do. So after just a few words about John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism and temptation, Mark brings us to the shore of Galilee where four fisherman are about their usual business when Christ comes to where they are says, "follow me!"

First there was Simon and his brother Andrew. Jesus sees them doing their job--you know--throwing their nets...And Mark doesn't tell us any of the details--what they saw in each other, why Jesus picked them, what kind of conversation they might have had, what questions might

have been asked, what feelings these fishermen may have felt. Mark just cuts to the chase. Jesus says, "Follow me," and without a word they get up and go.

Then comes James and John. They are farther down the beach sitting in a boat with their father mending their nets. And, again the story is brief--Mark doesn't show us anything but the highlights. Jesus comes to them, he sees them, he calls them, they go.

Now, I don't know about you, but I always want the details. Did Simon or Andrew, James or John experience inner struggle? Did they worry about leaving the life they knew? Were they frustrated with their life and want a different one? Was their father angry as his sons – his pension, his social security – just up and walked away? Did they have sweethearts? Mark does not sure any of the process of deciding, discerning, choosing.

But maybe Mark leaves out the process because, in the end, the process is not the point. The whole point is that Jesus finds us, calls us, and the call is to go with him. This is about committing to the person of Jesus Christ. It's not about committing to a doctrinal statement or a program or some denominational tradition--it's about personal commitment to Christ. Jesus never said--"Come, be a Christian" or "Come, embrace the reform theology" or "Come, do this ministry." Jesus said, "Come with me – abide with me – live in me – follow me."

It is easy to suppose that when we think about "our calling"--we automatically think of a job, a position – like elder or deacon – or perhaps some vocation like pastor or a medical career or one of teaching. We can become so frustrated about finding our way – finding our call. The faithful people I know want to do the right thing, want to follow Jesus; we'd just like some clarity! "Lord, just tell me! Or if you're busy a postcard, email, a text message, anything."

But here's the thing: The Bible itself is amazingly non-anxious about all of that. Scripture seems focused on this: Give yourself to the person of Jesus Christ. Know him, follow him, love him, listen for him. I think the Gospels would agree that in doing so you and I will discover the freedom to do what we do best, to do what we love best, BUT --that's not the main thing! (How quick I / we go from calling to doing!) What Scripture calls us to is belonging to Christ.

And isn't that actually good news? For one thing--if our first calling, THE calling, is to belong to Jesus, then we are freed to change along the way--to grow and to become! Read the Gospels – Jesus doesn't pigeon hole people. There is freedom and hope in belonging to Christ; as the Gospel of John puts it Jesus has come to give us life abundant.

A pastor tells a story about a friend: He a man in his late 60's, rugged, burly, brilliant – kind of like the image of the Marlborough Man. He studied at a prestigious university in the East some years ago, and then he moved to Texas to work on his doctorate. But somewhere along the way he became addicted to cocaine--just tumbled into that dark hole. Lost his family, lost his place in graduate school, lost big pieces of himself. But somehow he washed up on the shores of a good church. And when he did, he was so fragile--he looked like he'd been "rode hard and put up wet"--as they say in Texas. But the folks in that church put their arms around that man and slowly he started to heal, and eventually, miraculously, even reunited with his wife and children.

My pastor friend told of having this couple in their home for dinner and the man began to talk about where his life was going. "I want to believe," he said, "that my best days aren't behind me, and that my life can still count, can still make a difference for God." He sat at their table with his head in his hands. "I just can't help but feel like I've blown all of my best chances," he said. That's when his wife, a wonderful, middle-aged bohemian Texas flower child kind of woman, reached over and took his hand and said, "Baby, you've got to take your sticky fingers off that steering wheel. If God could yank Jesus out of a grave, I figure he can make something beautiful out of busted parts." I don't expect to hear the gospel better expressed than that.

Remembering our first calling—that we are called to follow Jesus, belong to Christ – gives the freedom to change--and to grow--and even to blow it and find our way back again.

But it's good news for another reason. There can be long stretches of time when our calling doesn't change, times when the rhythm of life seems dull or demanding. In those times remembering our first call--to belong to Christ—might help us live into that time with more integrity and we may find through it a time of unexpected sweetness or growth. One of my mentors in the faith, Dr. Alan Lewis taught theology before he went on to glory. Before his tenure at Austin Presbyterian Seminary, he was a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. They commissioned him to write a paper on the Motherhood of God. He did so. They vilified him for it on the floor of General Assembly. Very public, very painful. Serving the church is not easy or without pain. Yet, I believe that Alan survived that difficult period because he knew that his first calling so to follow Jesus and belong to Christ. Because Alan was grounded in that reality, he could survive the difficulties ministry.

We all experience tiredness and discouragement in our lives and in our lives as Christians. And as another put it: "in those kinds of worn-out, bleary-eyed moments God always reminds me of the day when Jesus was about ready to punch his time card and call it a day. But he looks outside--sees the whole city gathered around his door! And he sighs and he puts his time card back in the slot and reaches down into the empty well of himself and tells his disciples: "Bring them in...this is why I came." Leaning into the reality of our first calling – our belonging to Christ – we remember that belonging to Jesus and serving in his name means ministry with some tears in it and some sweat in it and even sometimes flecks of our own blood in it.

By the way, there is one constant in the stories from Mark today and it's this: that everyone who answers the call of Christ leaves something behind--did you notice that? Andrew and Simon leave their nets; James and John leave their father. We can't follow Jesus and not be willing to change what's in our hands and what's in our hearts, discipleship finds us leaving more and more of the past behind in order to move forward with Christ. Saying yes to anything means saying no to something else. This is especially true when we say yes to follow Christ.

A not so attractive part of my personality is that I like people to think I am smart. When Donna Key asked me to be a Greek tutor one summer (it was to be my last one at seminary), I was thrilled. It was like being on the 'A' list for parties. However, I had already said yes to participate in Chaplaincy program. I called to cancel. I could, but it would cost be \$700.00 to do so. I didn't have \$7.00! I couldn't say yes to Donna no matter how much I wanted to. I also realized I would have to lay aside my resentment and disappointment. I couldn't sit beside the

sick and the dying with a chip on my shoulder. It was surprisingly hard to do so. Saying yes to follow Jesus meant for me that I could not have a bad attitude about this. Turns out, I really needed the Chaplaincy program – it taught me a lot about my role as a pastor and a care giver.

Christ is calling us today, his calling comes fresh every day, and what might you and I need to leave behind in order to get up and go? To follow Jesus means to be changed, to move on, and to leave some things behind. To our elders and deacons, they will be saying no to some things to make room for meetings and duties. That is true for any of us who work on committees. I would like to find a way to organize and generate new ideas without committees and meetings – but I haven't discovered it yet. We don't go to meetings because they are our calling! We write agendas and set aside time for meetings because we want to see pieces of the kingdom among us: hungry fed, children nurtured, the mournful comforted. So we put up with meetings in order that together we might do good in Jesus' name for the sake of the kingdom.

When Jesus says, "Follow me," and we say, "yes," we can't predict where we'll be taken. It's O.K. not to be sure of what it all means and how it'll all work out. All that matters is that Jesus has seen you as you are; has loved you and called you to follow.

And so, Lord Jesus, thank you for finding us where we are and loving us so uniquely, for calling us to yourself, and giving us such a towering vocation in this world as your disciples. Please give us strength for the journey and joy to walk in the light you shine on this day. For it's in your name that we pray. Amen