

Sermon 21 January 2018
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

There is no question that the disciples made a dramatic decision when they responded to Jesus' call. They left their nets behind them. Some of the commentators I've read in recent years say that the choice they made was really not that unusual in their culture. Many young men would commit a time of their lives to following a religious teacher. They would follow and serve a rabbi, learn from him, deepen their understanding of his teachings, become more mature in their faith, and *then* for the most part return to the familiar stream of life in community. They came home better men.

Of course some were disappointed, even disillusioned, with the teacher and their experience. Some came home cynical, but most were changed for the better. Their lives were enriched and society was strengthened by the consequences of their time apart.

We have all met such people, men and women who stepped away from the "normal" sequence of building a career. Maybe they chose two years in the Peace Corps, one enlistment in the military, or occasionally a quest for wisdom in the East, a disciple of a yogi. Almost always, those who make such choices return to the world, return to *us* changed. Sometimes the change is traumatic—a bad year in Iraq—but most of the time we see a new quality in these modern-day disciples; they have more knowledge and understanding, they see a bigger world, they are somehow *wiser* than those who did not venture forth into the world.

In some instances the commitment of the Jewish disciples would become permanent; for them, the call was a first step on a life-long journey. They would have a passion for a new identity as a disciple of Hillel or a zealot committed to resisting Roman occupation. That is what happened to Simon and Andrew, James and John. They could not have anticipated what they were getting into when they left their fishing nets and followed Jesus.

The same is true for every person who has responded to the call to follow Jesus. When we first come to Christ, we have no idea what we are getting into.

We need to make a distinction here.

There is a difference between being part of a religious tradition and following where the Spirit of God leads us.

It was true for the early disciples—they were practicing Jews when Jesus approached them on the beach that day. They were part of a rich tradition that shaped their lives. They worshiped, they listened to the wise, time-proven teaching of the priests and scholars, they spoke a common spiritual language and lived a common spiritual rhythm with their neighbors. They went to synagogue on the Sabbath, and they followed the traditions they were taught. They knew what it meant to be Jewish, the rights and rituals, the restrictions and the freedoms of their faith. They knew what they were getting into.

But they had no idea what they were getting into when they stepped out of the boat and left their nets behind. They had no idea what was coming. If someone had told them what would happen in the next three years, do you think they would have answered Jesus? It is idle speculation, but I doubt they would have responded so *immediately* if they had received a report on the events of what we call Holy Week.

It is one of the kindnesses, one of the graces of God that we do not know the details of the future. It is unlikely we would go to the most important places, make the most important decisions, travel the hard and profoundly rewarding path God offers us, *if* we knew how difficult and costly the journey would be.

God is gracious to lead us step by step into the costly magnificence of our faithful journey. We would miss all the truth and goodness, all the freedom, all the satisfaction, all the life—we would miss the heart and soul and breath, necessary pain and joy of our salvation. If we knew the cost, if we were given glimpses of the hard times to come, would we answer the call and follow Jesus?

Every week we sing, *“Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* We sing those words after we read the scriptures for the day, and we think about the Bible. But the Word of God is more than the Bible. Jesus is the Word of God, and he leads us step by step into a future we might resist if we knew too much too soon. We are ready for

the next step of faith when it comes, because the Spirit prepares us for it. We are not the same person we were at the beginning. Over the days and years of faithfulness the Spirit of God changes our hearts and our lives. Day by day and step by step, we become who we are. We become more fully alive.

Last week I read the comments of a New Testament scholar that changed the way I read Mark 1:17. Here is how the Common English Bible translates the passage. "*Come follow me,*" he said, "*and I'll show you how to fish for people.*" Ted Smith says a more literal translation might be "*Follow me and I will make you to become fishers for people.*" There is a crucial difference in the two translations. The first translation makes it sound like a *task*; the second says it is an *identity*. Following Jesus and reaching out to others with the message of love is less about what we *do* and more about who we *become* as disciples of Christ. The King James Version of the Bible got this one right. We do what we are—our actions are the results of our identity.

The disciples did not realize they were taking the first step into a different way of looking at and living in the world. Before it was over they would be born again, and again, and again into the world where God reigns. Through trial and tranquil times, in joy and sorrow and joy again, **they** would be changed more and more to be like the rabbi who spoke their names on the shore that day. They had no idea—and neither do we.

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard,
and no mind has imagined
what God has prepared for those who love him."
(1 Corinthians 2:9)

We have no idea what God has prepared for us. As we move deeper into and far beyond our religion, as we follow Jesus wherever he leads—the adventure continues. Isn't that great!