

Called to Follow

The Rev. Ted Pardoe
Grace Church in New York
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 22, 2012

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me.’” This was not a particularly long Gospel reading today. A mere seven verses. But, as is so often the case in Holy Scripture, there is quite a lot contained in the passage. It certainly contrasts with the call to follow Jesus that we heard last Sunday in John’s Gospel with the calling of Philip and Nathanael. That was quite a bit wordier. It practically felt like Jesus was interviewing Nathanael about the disciple position. Today it is a very succinct call “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Yet we are reading back to back passages about our being called to follow Jesus in these two different Gospel passages. We are strongly encouraged, through the lectionary, to really take this matter of being called by Jesus to follow him to heart. This may seem completely self-evident but it still beckons us to closer examination and reflection of what we have heard.

The succinct seven verses in today’s Gospel passage from Mark actually address two distinct matters in the rapidly unfolding narrative about Jesus’ life in this Gospel. In the first two verses we have the proclamation about the “good news of God.” We may note – sadly - that John has been arrested but we now enter fully into our encounter with Jesus. It is his time and he has come to spread the kingdom of God offering us God’s grace and love in our role in this divine history as believers through faith. Then we get the main portion of today’s passage “Follow me.”

Indeed in saying these very words we see Simon and Andrew and James and John “immediately” walk away from their fishing vocation on the Sea of Galilee to become disciples. The very livelihoods that sustain these four, fishing, they walk away from. What put food on their tables and a roof over their heads. They up and leave it all. I think it is also well worth observing that Jesus is calling marginal, poor fishermen, Simon and Andrew and well off fishermen, James and John. You see Simon and Andrew only had a net to cast from the shore to catch their fish. James and John, on the other hand, have a boat offshore that they work with their father and hired men. As we hear so much today about the economic challenges and inequities that we all face, we should take to heart those from different economic backgrounds who dropped everything to answer the call to follow Jesus. Just a week ago Saturday, at our Diocese Convention, a resolution passed about the Occupy movement with a large majority that seeks to shed light on the challenges we face both as citizens and as followers of Jesus Christ. I commend it to you for a read. You may find it on the Diocese website.

At the same time, there is an additional key provided for us to the risen Jesus in the words “follow me.” For at the very end of the Gospel (Mark 16:7), we are told that the resurrected Jesus still goes before us allowing us to follow him. We may begin contemplating how we are called to follow Jesus today knowing that as we proceed with the story, through the anxiety and terror of the cross, that the resurrected Lord lies ahead in glory calling us to follow him.

Let’s delve deeper into today’s passage. I don’t think that we can afford to discount the immediacy of what happens as daunting as it may appear. It is that specific word for both pair of new disciples. “Immediately.” Immediately Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed him. Immediately James and John left their father and followed him. I don’t know about you all but to me that’s pretty urgent stuff. It is very much meant to be a contrast for us as people of the

Bible who would look, for example, at a classic Old Testament call by God through Elijah to Elisha.

In First Kings (1 Kings 19:19-21), when Elisha becomes Elijah's disciple there is not much urgency to the call to follow the great prophet Elijah. It seems as if Elijah is just sauntering through the place where Elisha is out plowing the fields with his team of oxen. Elisha knows that he is being called into divine service but he sure doesn't drop everything and immediately follow Elijah as Simon, Andrew, James and John do immediately following Jesus. No questions asked.

Elisha goes off and says good-bye to his mom and dad then he throws a sacrificial banquet for his clans folk to show how he really is going off on the mission for God.

Even Moses tried to talk his way out of serving God when God spoke with him from the burning bush in Exodus (Exodus 3:4-12). God himself explains the pain he feels for his people Israel; their misery, their crying for help, their sufferings at the hands of their Egyptian taskmasters and oppressors. God says to Moses "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" to a "land flowing with milk and honey."

Moses' reply conjures up in my mind an image straight from a Mel Brooks movie. I know he made a spoof of Moses in History of the World Part 1. Moses brings three stone tablets with five commandments on each one down from Mount Sinai. Needless to say, one breaks and we are left with the ten commandments. But Moses reply to God's request is "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh" and do all that God has suggested he do. Okay. Moses relents and gets about his divine task.

These Old Testament call narratives couldn't be more different from what happens today with Jesus and his first four disciples. That's the point. Jesus Christ has come to fulfill the law and bring the kingdom of God as we heard in the first verses of the Gospel today. Everything is new and different. Now Simon and Andrew and James and John don't hesitate to truly drop everything and take off, called to follow their Lord and Savior. Oh that it was that easy. I sure know that I am so often like Moses wanting to debate what God would have me do. "Who am I God that I should go and do something that I don't want to do."

However, I recently had an unexpected reminder of several events in my faith journey that give me hope that I have been able to become more attentive to what God would have me do and how I may indeed follow Jesus' call. I was reading an article in *The New Yorker* just a week or so ago. The piece was essentially about a person named Tim Leiweke. He is the partner of Philip Anschutz who is a multi-billionaire businessman. Anschutz's privately held company consists of literally hundreds of businesses all around the world in a wide variety of activities. Leiweke is heading up a huge push in sports and entertainment in Los Angeles for the Anschutz Entertainment Group. Anschutz is reportedly an intensely private person. *The New Yorker* article shed a little light on a few of Anschutz's personal interests. Boy did I receive a surprise. It reported that since 1999, Anschutz has been giving friends copies of "Half Time – Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance." I couldn't believe my eyes. About that same time - 1999, a former Grace Church small group stalwart had suggested this very book to me as we enjoyed a breakfast catch up one morning as I was about to begin my first job in the not for profit realm after leaving my Wall Street position. I should have expected such an insightful suggestion from a fellow who was in the investment banking business after receiving various academic distinctions including a master's degree in philosophy and theology at Oxford.

The book made a deep impact on me for which I will always be grateful to this acquaintance. “Half Time” sits on my bookshelf close to my study Bible and primary Scripture commentaries. *The New Yorker* article author described “Half Time” as being of the Christian self-help genre. Power to her. I think she was sniping at Anschutz’s support of certain Christian social organizations that she is wary of. Anschutz’s movie production company has a couple of pretty significant films to its credit including, “The Chronicles of Narnia” obviously about C. S. Lewis’s remarkable Christian allegory and “Ray” the excellent biographical film about Ray Charles.

In the book a direct and simple and call it Christian self-help style if you like, “Half Time” offers readers a terrific stream of thinking about ordering our Christian faith priorities in a world that can challenge us on so many fronts. It truly allowed me to listen in new ways for Jesus’ call to follow him. I did not drop everything at that time sensing a call to ordained ministry but I certainly began to think in a different way about my life.

Six years later, in the middle of a late summer night, in a motel room in Taos New Mexico, I sat bolt upright in my bed having the image of two words searing me. Choose life (Deut. 30:19). I couldn’t put them out of my mind as I continued my drive across the country heading for New York City. I called Helen, my wife, to check in the next day and learned that a dear friend had died. She had struggled mightily against cancer for about ten years. She was Jewish and we prayed for her here at Grace in the old Thursday morning Bible study group. I made it back to New York City in time to attend her funeral. The rabbi who was leading the service based his homily on the very words that had become indelibly etched in my mind just a few days before. Choose life.

That was it. Straight to my rector at St. Esprit I went and I suppose the rest is history as far as my being here today as a priest is concerned. Now a great deal else was involved with my discernment of a call to ordained ministry but I know with deep faith and hope that these two events allowed me to hear more clearly how God has called me to follow his Son Jesus Christ. I would like to exhort all who are here today to reflect on Jesus calling Simon and Andrew and James and John to follow him in believing in the good news of the kingdom of God. However you look at your own faith journeys, expect the unexpected. Be attentive to the seemingly smallest of things. Remember that God did not communicate with Elijah at Horeb in the great wind that split mountains. Nor did God talk to his prophet in the earthquake and fire that followed the wind. No. It was in “a sound of sheer silence” that God spoke with Elijah. As we all go about the multitude of demands on us after our worship here together, let us listen as attentively as possible for just how God is calling each and every one of us to follow Jesus Christ. We don’t have to immediately drop everything. If that happens for someone. Great. For most of us, I expect it might be more gradual but nonetheless possible. We know that the risen Lord is already leading the way. He invites us continually to answer his call and spread the good news in all that we do and all that we are for the good of God’s kingdom.

AMEN.