

The Third Sunday after Epiphany January 22, 2012

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the old spiritual called “I have decided to follow Jesus.” The concluding words in each stanza of the song are these: “No turning back, no turning back.” *No turning back?* The implication is pretty obvious, isn’t it? Following Jesus is decisive and complete. Our lives are not the same. There’s no turning back.

Do you marvel at the way the fishermen responded to the call of Jesus? Jesus announced the good news: “The Kingdom of God has come near.” When Jesus called the fishermen to be part of that Kingdom it wasn’t to be part of a Kingdom that was static or fenced in but to be part of a Kingdom that would unfold in an adventure. So, Jesus said, “Follow me.” So these fishermen left their busy jobs. They dropped their nets. They dropped everything. They left it all behind to follow Jesus. No turning back.

The Gospel of Mark is rather clear on that score. Mark likes to use the word “immediately.” Immediately Simon and Andrew followed him. Immediately Jesus called James and John, who left their father behind in the boat. These fishermen didn’t pause or take a break when Jesus called. They didn’t think about it. They didn’t pray about it. Immediately, without a moment’s hesitation, they dropped everything and followed Jesus.

How does that strike you? What is it about the call of Jesus that creates such a response? Do you think these fishermen were foolish to leave their jobs and take the risk of going with Jesus or do you imagine that their move was rather gutsy? If you are someone who really values spontaneity, I would imagine that what these fishermen did strikes you as rather impressive. If you are more circumspect or ponderous, I suspect you would think that what they did wasn’t so impressive. Who would leave their job and even their father behind to do this radical thing? Why would anyone act so hastily? From that point of view, what these fishermen did seems rather impulsive and downright foolish.

I like how St. Jerome, one of the ancient teachers of the Church, looked upon this passage of Scripture. In a sermon on this passage, Jerome said that the response of the fishermen was irrational, but he didn’t turn that into a negative spin. “There must have been something divinely compelling in the face of the Savior. Otherwise they would not have acted so irrationally as to follow a man whom they had never before seen. Does one leave a father to follow a man in whom he sees nothing more than he sees in his father? ... there was something divine in the Savior’s very countenance that men, seeing, could not resist.”

Something divine in the Savior’s very countenance they could not resist.

Jerome essentially says, “Who could resist?” Sure it’s irrational, but when we encounter the living God, the bounds of reason burst apart and while that may seem foolish to the world, is the response of faith. You see, these fishermen were signing on to something of an adventure. I’m not sure they knew how the journey would unfold. I doubt whether these new disciples had any sense that Jesus’ journey would lead to a Cross. I suspect they had no clue that following him would include a fair amount of suffering. In fact, Mark tells us, that the disciples would fail to get it even after Jesus told them, but maybe they didn’t need to get it.

Maybe old Jerome was on to something. As irrational as their immediate response was, the important thing was that in Jesus they saw the face of the living God. Not knowing how it would all turn out was okay. Taking the risk was all right. Speculating on what would occur or detailing the journey ahead of time wasn't necessary. Following Jesus on the journey was enough.

Many of you are familiar with one of my favorite prayers. It's in the ELW and it is a prayer that is dear to the Holden Village community. It's called the "Good Courage" prayer and, in fact, it is a prayer we use to close our Journey of Faith session: "O God, you have called us, your servants to venture of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

It's okay not to know. We need not know ahead of time how the journey turns out. That might strike panic in the hearts of the careful and cautious, but it is the posture of discipleship. To know that God's hand is leading us and God's love supporting us ... that's enough to know. It is enough.

Last weekend this congregation formally launched a Vision Process. Over the next several months, your Vision team will be leading the way as together we seek to listen to God's call and take the risk of living deeper into God's mission. If you were at worship last weekend you heard Pastor Rick Rouse preach a sermon. Pastor Rouse is the consultant and adviser for this process and in his sermon he talked about the important for us, the church, to understand ourselves as disciples called to join God in God's mission for the world. You might recall that he made the contrast between a maintenance church and a mission church. The maintenance church seeks order and safety, but the mission church is on a journey, an adventure, following the lead of someone very specific. Where will this Jesus lead us in this process? Where will we Jesus take us? Who knows?

Our task is to remain open, prayerful, alert, listening, and willing to take the risk to let Jesus take us places ... maybe places we would not choose to go, but places where God would have us go and resting secure that God's hand is leading us and God's love supporting us.

Not long ago, Britt and I had a conversation with a pastor who shared something of his story with us, including the time he took a call at a church that surprised him. It was a call he resisted. You see, he was quite happy and content with the call he had. But there was a congregation looking for a new pastor and his name was given to them and they decided to interview him. He wasn't thrilled at the prospect but went along with it. Since he didn't want a new call, he decided he would just enjoy the interview, throw caution to the wind, and be as honest and forthright as possible, knowing that some of what he would say would rub a lot of people the wrong way. But, he didn't care. He had nothing to lose.

Well, much to his surprise, they called him up and offered him the call. He reluctantly went back for another meeting with the congregation where they welcomed him as though he were a king, showering him with gifts and accolades and speaking about how they were excited about their new future and their new leader. He had no intention of taking this call, but in the midst of this second meeting he turned to his wife and said, "Well, I guess I have no choice. It looks like the Holy Spirit is winning out on this one." He took the call.

How could he resist?

I have a friend in Portland who switched jobs because his sense of mission in daily life conflicted with the values of his workplace. It wasn't an easy call, but for my friend it was a response to Jesus' call to follow. No turning back. Who could resist?

Perhaps you've heard similar stories ... maybe your story isn't so different ... our response to Jesus' call might seem irrational or downright foolish to the world, but it is the response to one whose love overwhelms us and whose vision seizes our hearts.

Old Jerome was on to something. Those fishermen saw in the face of the living God. How could they resist?

Where Jesus calls you and me differs. Each of us has different gifts and where Jesus calls this congregation ... but there is a common denominator running through all these response. It usually has something to do with love ... where there is scarcity and greed it is a call to be generous; where there is enmity and hatred it is usually a call to forgiveness; where there is suffering and brokenness it is a call to healing and compassion; where there is oppression and a call to justice.

Why? Because we've seen the living God in the face of Jesus, the Crucified One, the man Of the Cross. We've seen the great epiphany of God's love in the tears of the man on the Cross... ..

How can we resist?

O God, you have called us, yours servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.