

Sunday January 21st, 2024

Epiphany 3

Mark 1:14-20

“Drop Everything!”

I know this may really surprise you to learn this about me, but I really enjoy the activity of recreational, or as it is called, sport fishing. This past summer I went fishing with friends, and over the years I have spent many hours watching others catch more and bigger fish than myself. I confess that I even enjoy, from time to time, watching those fishing shows on television, like Bob Isumi’s *Real Fishing Show*.

I watch both these programs with a longing to get back out there with rod and reel, and perhaps in the faint hope that I could get some new tips and strategies to land the big one. I am also, I readily admit, addicted to the large Bass Outfitter’s store in Vaughn. It is hard for me to go in there, and not break the bank with stuff I will likely never use.

I have, over the years, tried deep sea fishing in Florida, South Carolina, and PEI, halibut fishing in Alaska and of course freshwater fishing; and a few years ago, I even spent a very romantic Valentine’s Day ice fishing with Laura on Lake Simcoe. I am happy to report that Laura said she enjoyed the experience, and even said she would go again, but maybe not on Valentine’s Day.

I do know as a fisherman that I am a bit brighter than the two fellows I heard about from the southern states who decided they wanted to try some ice fishing.

The two friends made great plans to travel to Canada, to a lake known for its superb ice fishing. When they arrived at the outfitters, they discovered they needed an ice auger to drill holes in the ice. It was an expensive purchase, but they were determined to get this ice fishing done correctly. After drilling a hole, the two men sat down in their chairs, and dropped their lines into the hole.

It wasn’t very long until a man approached them and told them, “You won’t find any fish in that hole.” The men thought that this fellow was obviously a local, and knew his stuff, so they packed up and went to another location and drilled a new hole. Sure, enough the same man came again, and said the same thing to them, so once again they moved to a new place.

When the man approached the third time, the two anglers said, “Why do you keep telling us there is no fish in our holes?” “Well, for two reasons; I’m the manager of this hockey arena, and the lake is two miles down the road.” As I said, I hope if I ever get a chance to ice fish again, I will be a bit brighter than those two fellows. I do, however, understand fully the inherited dangers related to fishing, to one’s spiritual health.

After all the proverb states, “I fish, therefore I lie.” Perhaps my interest in fishing, is behind my affinity with the disciples, who were fishermen, namely Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Although, unlike myself, who fishes for recreation, these four men fished to feed their families.

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With no modern equipment like fish finders, or outboard motors, these rugged men, spent hours tossing round nets about 10 to fifteen feet across, into the open water in the hopes of catching something.

Unlike modern trawler nets, this fishing method rarely caught more than a handful of fish at a time. That makes Peter's experience of the nets full to overflowing in Luke's account, even more amazing. The location of our Gospel lesson, the Sea of Galilee, is an inland freshwater lake, which is only twelve miles in length and six miles across at its widest point. Our own Lake Erie is several times larger. Although small, Galilee, at least in Jesus' day, teemed with life.

Sadly, I found a news story from 2010 in which Israeli authorities banned all fishing in the Sea of Galilee do to depleted fish stocks. Several fish species were in real danger of extinction. Sounds like our own east coast cod stock problems. In Jesus' day there were numerous species of fish, and some species could be found nowhere else in the world, according to Josephus the historian. One species called St. Peter's fish; named after the time Peter found a coin in a fish's mouth, is a type of tilapia.

The abundance of fish gave rise to several fishing villages popping up along the banks of the sea, where generations of families, going back thousands of years, caught and sold fish. This was the case for the four disciples we met in our passage for today. Andrew and Peter were brothers, and James and John, also brothers, are recorded as having been fishing with their father Zebedee.

Into this routine fishing scene enters Jesus, and everything changes. At first reading, the calling of the disciples seems a peculiar story. The men are going about their daily business, and Jesus approaches and says what? "Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." I know in some versions of the bibles it says, "Come be my disciples", but the literal rendering of this passage is "Come, follow me." But these other versions are correct, because the intention of Jesus' words is that these men become disciples.

The call of Jesus is clear; to follow him is to become his disciple. But consider what happened here. These four men were in the middle of their work, and Jesus calls them, and they simply walk away. James and John left their father with the hired servants. Anyway, these four men get up; leave their nets, boats, and all their gear, and walk away with Jesus.

Imagine if that happened today. You are busy doing your job, and suddenly Jesus comes along and calls you away. What do you do? How can you leave your work undone; your nets left untended, and without being properly cleaned? Perhaps we might make up an excuse not to follow, and not just any excuse, but some reasonable ones. "But Jesus, I've got things to do, places to go, and people to see. I've got a family to feed."

I have several questions in response to this story. What motivated these men? What did their families think? If they are gone, who paid the bills, and caught the fish? Perhaps we are missing something here.

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What we might overlook is the sense of urgency in Jesus' call. This was not a mere teacher/disciple relationship, something I talked about last week, because there is a critical phrase used, "I will make you fishers of men."

If we take this phrase as simply a clever play on words, and the situation these men find themselves, we fail to appreciate the power of this image. The term "fishers of men" was a biblical one, long before Jesus walks the Sea of Galilee. It is a phrase used by the Old Testament prophets to speak of God's judgment and calling of people. Jeremiah 16:15-16 reads, "For I will bring them back to this land that I gave their ancestors. But now I am sending for many fishermen who will catch them."

Ezekiel 29:4 reads, "I will put hooks in your jaws and drag you out on the land with fish sticking to your scales." These passages have a distinctly ominous tone to them because they are stressing the judgment of God. Just like fish are caught and sorted, with the valuable ones kept, and the unwanted ones disposed of, God will gather us in and judge us as to whether we are worthy of the kingdom.

In the ancient community of Qumran, the people who prepared the Dead Sea Scrolls, they saw their duty as passing this message of judgment onto the people, as a way of being God's fishermen.

One of the Dead Sea Fragments reads, "And thou hast set me in a place of exile among many fishers that stretch a net upon the face of the waters, and among hunters sent among the sons of perversity." (1QH v. 7-8) These fishermen would have been aware of this concept of fishers of men, and I strongly believe they were likely aware of whom Jesus was, at least as a teacher, and perhaps had even heard him speak.

The immediate function of these fishers of men is, to accompany Jesus as witnesses to the proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom, and the necessity for people to turn to God through radical repentance. They are to confront people with God's kingdom. The point should also be made that in Mark's account, Jesus has the supreme and sovereign authority to call anyone, and our response is to be like that of these four men and respond with radical obedience.

To truly be fishers of men, one must follow Jesus. There are many passages that speak about the radical, all-consuming nature of discipleship, but there is one in Luke 14:25-26 that stands out.

*"Great crowds were following Jesus. He turned to them and said to them, 'If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters-yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple.'"*

I think what really unsettles me about Jesus' call, is that we have over time watered down the radical nature of it. We have accepted that Jesus does call people, at least ministers and missionaries, but we temper it with all kinds of conditions and qualifications.

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We might like to say for example *“that Jesus never really meant us to literally love our families less than him or leave our livelihoods to follow him. Not even Jesus would expect that of us.”*

Thinking about Jesus’ radical call, makes us mindful that maybe we are more like the rich young ruler than we care to admit. Even if we are good people, doing all the right things for our families and neighbours; we still love money, fame, or privilege more than Jesus. It is no wonder Jesus called fishermen, and not Pharisees to follow him, although I think the invitation was open to them as well.

Pharisees were religious specialists, who believed they knew what best, and what God’s kingdom was all about. They were not open to the radical nature of the Kingdom being ushered in with Jesus. Although the fishermen struggled to comprehend everything Jesus did, they were willing to try and see things differently. Certainly, after Christ’s resurrection, the whole kingdom enterprise was much clearer in their hearts and minds.

Maybe our hearts are too cluttered to accept the radical call of Christ. Maybe we hear Christ calling us, and we think first about what we perceive we will lose or worry about what our families will say. “What would my parents, spouse, children or even grandchildren say, if I did some radical thing for God?” “What if I left my current job and headed off to follow Christ on an adventure in faith?”

Now I know what our first response might be; “Now come on Darrell, Jesus was just being metaphorical.” Really, I think we have become so comfortable in our western spirituality, that we forget how costly faith is. In Mark 13 Jesus is more than blunt about the cost of following him. He talks of the time coming when allegiance to him will cost us everything.

*You will be handed over to the courts and beaten in the synagogues. You will be accused before governors and kings of being my followers. Brother will betray brother to death, fathers will betray their own children, and children will rise against their parents and cause them to be killed. And everyone will hate you because of your allegiance to me. (Vs. 9, 12-13)*

I think Jesus was trying to be quite clear in letting us know that: true, radical, life consuming discipleship, will lead to some serious consequences. It is enough to turn some away, and some did turn from Jesus. In fact, I wonder how many others on that beach, when Jesus walked the shoreline, refused to heed his call. True discipleship, at some level, seeks an abandonment of ourselves, and those things we cling to, that we believe give our lives eternal meaning, but are finite.

C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* about the true nature of Jesus call when he writes, *Give me all. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down.*

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*I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the natural self, all the desires which we think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked-the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours."*

Put another way, I remember some time ago hearing a quotation that made me stand still in conviction. I cannot remember who said it, but the words have long haunted me. "If we were arrested for being Christians, would there be enough evidence to convict us?" Discipleship means a complete overhaul of our lives. It means a clearing out of our world view, our ideas, our habits, our values, our relationships; everything!

It is a scary prospect, and yet it is the only path to abundant life. I am mindful of an incident from the film *Men in Black*, about an underground agency that protects the earth from dangerous extraterrestrials. Agent K (Tommy Lee Jones); and agent J (Will Smith) a hotshot, New York cop, partner to exterminate a villainous alien, which is called a "bug", and is in actual fact a very large talking cockroach.

Before Agent J relinquishes his police badge to join *Men in Black*, Agent K explains the scenario for Agent J, who is still unsure of what the agency does, and wants of him. Agent K explains, "All right, here's the deal. At any given time, there are around 1,500 aliens on the planet. Most of them are right here in Manhattan. Most are decent enough. They are just trying to make a living. Humans, for the most part, don't have a clue."

Agent J asks, "But, uh, why the big secret? Humans are smart. They can handle it." Agent K answers: "A person is smart. People are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals, and you know it. Fifteen-hundred years ago, everyone knew the earth was the center of the universe. Five hundred years ago, everyone knew the earth was flat. And fifteen minutes ago, you knew that people were alone in the universe." With a sigh, Agent K adds, "Imagine what you'll know tomorrow."

J asks, "What's the catch?" "The catch?" K says. "The catch is you will sever every human contact. Nobody will ever know you exist anywhere. Ever." K pauses and adds, "I'll give you till sunrise to think it over." As K strolls away, J shouts, "Hey is it worth it?" "Oh yeah, it's worth it," K answers, "If you're strong enough."

Becoming Christ's disciple means severing the ties we have to our old lives. Maybe not all of them, but certainly the ones that remain will be fundamentally changed. With Christ as our teacher, we will see things differently. Our world view will be altered permanently. We may have to leave behind our nets and just follow, despite the consequences. And I know you are dying to ask, "Is it worth it?"

And I say, "Yes, it is worth it, not because we are strong enough, but because he is strong enough." So, are you ready, willing, and able to respond, to put down your nets, when Jesus calls?