

## **“Something fishy”**

**Sunday, January 24, 2021**

**Mark 1:14-20**

**Jesus’ urgent announcement calls us to respond to God’s call in our lives.**

Most of the good fishing stories in the Bible are found in the New Testament. And like all great fishing stories, they are really about something more than catching fish.

Mark tells us the story of Jesus finding James and John and Simon and Andrew. But there’s something fishy about this story, which I why I thought I would borrow a little bit of fishing gear to help tell the story. This tackle box was borrowed from our friend Bob Rowlands. If you know Bob, you know he enjoys a day of fishing now and then. This fishing pole belongs to my good buddy Carson Luther who tragically died this week at age 18. Both of these items remind me a bit of what Jesus says when he invites the disciples to follow him.

Simon and Andrew and James and John were out along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. These were not brothers out for a relaxing day of recreation. Fishing in Jesus’ time was hard, backbreaking work. It was a daily struggle of tossing nets into the sea, fighting back against weather. Their backs ached and linen nets cut into their fingers. Fishermen not only worked to provide for their families and village, but were also forced to pay heavy taxes and make payments on the loans that financed their boats and equipment.

It was far from an idyllic occupation.

Tossing the nets into the air, letting them fall, pulling them in. Time after time after time.

Their work did not allow for moments of self-reflection and meditating about the meaning of life. The meaning of life was simple: you worked to feed your family. Your hands blister from hauling the nets. Your backs are burned by the sun. Your mouths are filled with the sort of banter and rough-hewn curse words that we don’t normally use on Sundays.

This was more like tv’s “The Deadliest Catch” and less like Norman MacClean’s “A River Runs Through It.”

That's why I think there's something fishy about the way we've interpreted Jesus' urgent invitation. Mark reminds us that Jesus came into Galilee just after John the Baptist was arrested. He spies these guys working hard, earning little, struggling in each moment. He comes and says to them: "Enough is enough! Now is the time! Here come's God's kingdom. Change your hearts and lives and trust this good news!" And then he invites these rough-handed blue collar workers to do exactly that by following him. "I'll show you how to fish for people."

I like this translation from the Common English Bible a bit better than the one we have grown accustomed hearing. We usually hear "I'll make you fishers of people." That sounds as if we are baiting people into believing something about Jesus and God. What smells a bit fishy about that to me is that it makes Jesus into some sort of master salesman, mimicking the words of car sales people, "What can I do to make you believe in God today?

But Jesus does not come selling, as I think a fisherman like Bob Rowlands might tell us. He comes offering an identity. He comes with an message of urgency: the way you are living is not working. You may making a living, but are you making a life? Are you living into the full potential of God's love and grace?

Jesus is not calling the disciples to be a sales force. Jesus does not come to us and equip us with gimmicks and samples and techniques. Disciples are to do more than just pluck people out of the ocean—they are instead to live a life that is changed.

Let's be honest: there's something fishy about the way we have used this story. We've turned into a little fishing tale when Jesus has something greater in mind.

"Now is the time," he says. He speaks of time in the most urgent sense. God's kingdom—with its promises of peace and assurance of God's presence – is arriving. Ready or not, here it comes. "Change your hearts and lives and trust this good news!"

Or as one commentator puts it, "Enough is enough!" Fed up with John the Baptist's arrest, filled with the a new urgency of knowing God was about to do something new, Jesus appears and begins preaching. You can tell Jesus didn't go to Princeton Seminary: his sermon is short and doesn't include any jokes!

Standing on the shore, he looks at those hard at work and says, “This is the time; God is coming to you; change your lives and believe the good news.

Most of the time the word “repent” stirs a big old pot of guilt in us. We hear it as a word of judgment and condemnation. There’s an old cartoon that features a street preacher wearing a sign that reads “Repent! The End is Near!” He’s sitting in a therapist’s office and says, “Well, some hear me loud and some hear my clear. No one hears me loud and clear.” But the word here for repent means more than just creating a catalogue of our sins. The word “metanoia” means a change of heart, a change of direction. Jesus is not writing traffic tickets for sins, but is instead calling us to live in the deeper, more joyful life God intends.

Jesus, filled with the urgency that now is a time that really matters, comes along in the words of that great Scottish him to sing, “Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same? Will you use the faith you’ve found to reshape the world around, through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

Will you love the “you” you hide?

Jesus proclaims the urgent love of God that will change the identity of those working in the harshest of conditions. He offers new and lasting identity to those who are lost, whose hearts have been broken, who yearn for healing. He comes to us this day—and calls us to follow.

In his memoir of preaching in a country church not far from Alton, IL, Lutheran preacher Richard Lischer recounts how the story of his mother’s faith awakened in him this sort of understanding. “Her stories helped me understand what God can and cannot do,” he writes. “God cannot stop your mother from dying or your father from being a drunk. God can help you survive.” (Open Secrets, p. 18.)

The time is now, says Jesus. Follow me, says Jesus. It is a word of invitation—and friends, it is a invitation that our world desperately needs to hear today. He does not say, “Get in line, do everything you are supposed to do, and everything will be ok.” It is tempting to reduce all of this to a “to-do list,” or a series of techniques of roping people into faith. After all, doesn’t he say “I will make you fish for people?”

As Ted Smith quips,

“This translation makes it sound as if fishing for people were a *task*. The

better translation receives fishing for people as a new *identity*. A literal translation might read, "Follow me, and I will make you to become fishers for people." There is a world of difference between "I will make you fish" and "I will make you to become fishers." "I will make you fish" gives us one more activity to work into our datebooks. ("Right, Jesus, fish for people. How about every fourth Monday? Can anyone else do fourth Mondays?") But "I will make you to become fishers"? That promises a whole new life. (Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.)

Our calling is urgent: to help others find their identity as God's beloved children.

As I said earlier, the fishing pole I'm holding was given to my buddy Carson Luther. Carson was never a member of this church, but he was one of the fish who have swum around us. He was one of the hundreds of children who have come to our Mom's Day Out program. He was a loyal part of our Vacation Bible School all the way through high school. It was in these doors that Carson learned his identity that he was a beloved child of God. He would go out and fish – sometimes it was an excuse to get away from his mom, sometimes it was just a reason to take his old Jeep over muddy hills.

Sometimes it was a chance to think. But I like to think it was a chance to discover who he was called to be. And, friends, this is what we as a church are called to do: to go, and accept our identity that we are called to fish. To go and to know that God is with us, God is calling us, that we are to follow. Will you come and follow Christ, and never be the same? Thanks be to God. Amen.