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Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV
January 25, 2009—3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Texts: Jonah 3:1-5,10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Caught Up in God's Kingdom

This gospel story begins powerfully, doesn't it? "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled!" What you've been waiting for your whole life, and generations before you—it's here! "The kingdom of God has come near!" God's rule of love is close to you now. "Repent, and believe in the good news." This good news is for you! This is powerful stuff, and we can't wait to hear what happens next!

What happens next is a serious letdown. There are no trumpets of the kingdom, ushering in the end and new beginning. There are no falling stars, no angels singing.

What there is, is a walk along a lake. Fishermen with their nets. And a call: Follow me.

But wait—what about the kingdom? What about the fulfillment, the new beginning? What about the good news? Well, maybe it's not about drama and trumpets and angels. Maybe it has more to do with getting caught up in God's story, and putting our gifts at the service of God's kingdom.

On hearing this story, many people wonder, what *was* it about Jesus that made these 4 fishermen leave their nets immediately, without questioning, without saying, "I'll be right there. You go ahead; I'll catch up with you after I finish this net." Mark doesn't tell us what it was that made the difference, whether it was the look in Jesus' eyes or something else he said, or even previous conversations with the disciples that this brief story does not recount. Not knowing what it was forces us to think about ourselves—what kind of call could make *us* leave behind our nets, the things that keep us entangled, the things we hold onto and fear to lose.

"Follow me and I will make you fishers of people," Jesus says to Simon and Andrew. This is usually interpreted as the call to all of us: we are called to fish for people and get them hooked on Christ's life, caught up by God's kingdom. Commentators often point out that this is a strange metaphor for Jesus to use. When a fish is hooked or caught up in a net, the fish usually ends up dead. In the Old Testament, references to hooks and nets mean traps for people—not a good thing. Commentators remind us that as Jesus means it, fishing for people leads to life, not death.

Hearing this as a call for all followers of Jesus, we might miss the fact that these words were first said to *actual fishermen*. Jesus is pointing out a skill they already have, and inviting them to use it for the sake of the kingdom. "Hey Simon and Andrew, instead of getting fish caught up in your net, how about you help people get caught up in God's love?" If that's true, then if Simon and Andrew had been carpenters or engineers rather

than fishermen, Jesus might have said, “Follow me and I will make you builders of God’s kingdom.” If they had been storytellers: “Follow me and I will make you tellers of God’s story.”

What might he say to you? If you are a parent, perhaps Jesus might say, “Follow me and I will make you nurturers of God’s children.” If you are a student, Jesus might say, “Follow me and I will make you learners of God’s ways.” A scientist? “Follow me and I will make you careful observers of God’s amazing creation.”

God can use any skills God has given us for the sake of God’s kingdom. It might be a particular talent or it might be a spiritual gift of compassion or clarity. It might be the way we make a living, or something we do outside of our main role. Whatever it is, it means that in this story the walk by the lake is not a letdown after all, but the heart of the good news: The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near, *and you get to be a part of it*. Follow me, Jesus says, and you will be caught up in God’s story, part of the kingdom’s being fulfilled.

Jonah the reluctant prophet seems to have missed the good news of getting caught up in God’s story. As today’s reading begins, Jonah has already tried to duck out of God’s call once. That did not go well—thrown overboard on his disastrous run from God, swallowed by a fish and spit out on shore. Now, here is God’s grace, come to find him again: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” (Makes me wonder if Simon and Andrew left their nets on the first try, or if Jesus took a lot of walks along the Sea of Galilee.) So...Jonah answers the call this time, but it doesn’t seem like he’s excited about it. He doesn’t even make it all the way to the middle of the city. Can you just hear him? “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” That’s how I imagine it—like a petulant teenager doing his chores with the least amount of enthusiasm possible. So, the people of Nineveh believe God—not Jonah, but God through Jonah—and they repent, and the rest is history. God doesn’t destroy the city, and as the story continues after today’s portion, Jonah is mad. I suspect he is peeved with God not only because God showed mercy on Nineveh, but because of a question I’ve been known to ask and maybe you have too: “God, couldn’t you have done this some other way?” Jonah complains to God, what did you need *me* for? I *knew* you weren’t going to punish them—I could have just stayed home! Why did you put me through all this? Jonah has yet to learn what Simon and Andrew, James and John are discovering: God invites people—including reluctant prophets—to be a part of what God is up to. Sometimes we follow willingly, sometimes hesitantly, and other times we would just as soon jump overboard. But it is always grace; it is the way we, like Jonah, get caught up in God’s saving work.

Like Jonah, sometimes we need to hear God’s call more than once. In fact, Jesus calls to us many times throughout our lives, sometimes in a dramatic moment, and often more gradually. Throughout our lives we learn what our gifts are, and we hear Jesus’ call, a call to put those gifts to work for the sake of our neighbors in need, for the ones Jesus called “the least of these,” for our community and nation and all creation. Often that call comes with a cost, the cost of leaving behind whatever else we are caught up in. Whatever the cost to us, it will always be less than what it cost Jesus to make us part of

God's kingdom: Jesus gave up his life in love for that good news. His death and resurrection remind us that we are not the ones who bring in the kingdom through our own work, no matter how skilled or dedicated we are. There's a story much bigger than ourselves, *God's* own story, the story of Jesus. We are caught up in it through baptism, and it becomes part of us through communion. *That* is powerful good news, strong enough to make us leave behind those nets.

Even when a call comes from Jesus, often it comes through another person's voice, asking us for help, inviting us to serve. (We need community to help us interpret these calls; we don't all hear them the same way.) I heard echoes of Jesus' call this past week in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," where he called on people to become "extremists for love." Also this past week, I saw on TV many people in Washington for the inauguration because they had gotten caught up in the call to hope and service, and they wanted to be a part of that story. This morning you have a chance to hear State Assemblyman David Bobzien, telling us about the work being done in our area to care for creation. Who knows? Maybe some folks will hear a call to be a part of it.

Those calls that come through other people—they're not all from Jesus, of course. Human beings, Christian or not, have this remarkable ability to get caught up in something larger than ourselves. Throughout history, this has sometimes led people to work together and accomplish great things. It has also led to some terrible atrocities while claiming to do God's work. This is a sermon for another time, but it seems important to raise the issue here. As we respond to Jesus' calls, we always need to keep questioning and reflecting on whether we are really using our gifts for the sake of God's kingdom and our neighbors, or whether it's about our own pride and *self*-fulfillment and desire to be on the winning team. Are we extremists for love, or for something else?

Hearing this and knowing how people can get caught up in evil causes as well as God's cause, you may think it's safer not to get caught up in anything. It probably is. But if you're determined not to get caught up in anything, just mending your nets and minding your own business, isn't there a danger of letting Jesus walk right on by? And, if *we're* not caught up in and inspired to action by God's story, then how are other people going to hear Jesus' call along with us? I think especially of young people who are longing to be a part of a big story, to be caught up in a story as big as God's kingdom. But that, too, is a sermon for another day.

Speaking of young people, I sent an invitation to high schoolers this past week, and I hope and trust that this is Jesus calling. High schoolers are invited to be a part of a week-long mission trip to San Francisco next June, where we'll serve and learn from our neighbors among "the least of these" in the city. High schoolers watched a video about this urban ministry last week, and they particularly noticed the teenagers on the video who said that when you respond to such a call from Jesus, you are never quite the same again. Perhaps this is what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Corinthians: don't get too attached to all these normal human things. Our relationships, our circumstances, our feelings, our stuff can all become nets for us, hard to leave when Jesus calls. And, Paul says, you know he's going to, and that's going to change everything.

Jesus' call, and our response, changes us. It makes us a different kind of person; that's why I like the translation, "I will make you fishers of people," rather than "I will make you fish for people." Jesus' call is about who we are, even more than it's about what we do.

Answering Jesus' call changes the way we view our time, our talents, our bodies, our energy, our stuff, our relationships, and even our challenges. When we put them at God's disposal, we see that all those have always belonged to God rather than to ourselves. Caught up in God, we find ourselves, somehow, released. Our lives take on a new sense of meaning and purpose.

There's an old story of a traveler who came upon three stone cutters hard at work. The traveler asked the first what he was doing. "I'm cutting stone," he said. "Not a whole lot of fun, but it pays the bills." The traveler asked the second the same question. "I'm a really good stone cutter," he said. "Look at these smooth edges, the perfect proportions." Intrigued, the traveler asked the third what he was doing. The third stone cutter gazed out over the foundation and said with humility and awe, "I'm building a cathedral."

A cathedral was taking shape, and they got to be a part of it! We are all invited into the good news: the kingdom is here, and Jesus has made us a part of it. With Simon and Andrew, James and John, we hear his call today to get caught up in God's love. It's a call powerful enough for us to leave behind everything we thought we depended on. Fishermen, scientists, students, managers, parents, whatever and whoever we are: we leave our nets to follow Jesus, but we bring with us the skills God has given us. And we are never quite the same.

Hymn of the Day: ELW 798, Will You Come and Follow Me

*("Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?...")*

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