

Call and Response
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: Mark 1:14-20

Recently I spent an enjoyable and thoughtful afternoon visiting the newly-opened Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage on Richmond Road. I was moved—as I always am—by the shared religious tradition of Jews and Christians, so tragically disregarded through the ages by ignorance and suspicion, to such horrific consequence. One of the museum's permanent exhibitions focuses on Cleveland's Jewish community, and it was there that I learned about Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. In 1939, these local Jewish men developed and introduced a new comic book character, Superman. The display more than hinted at parallels between this superhero and the greatest of Jewish heroes, Moses. Think about it: both Superman and Moses were members of communities facing destruction. The two are launched as babies, one in a spaceship headed for earth, the other in a reed basket set down in the Nile River, faced incredible perils, and had to rely on the kindness of strangers (Pharaoh's daughter and the Kent family) for survival. Both grow up to achieve feats no ordinary man could do.

The gospel reading for today concerns the call of men who would also perform courageous acts, accomplish great things and become known as giants of faith. Like Moses and Superman, their beginnings are hardly auspicious. In ordinary time, on the most normal of days, amid the thrum of daily work, came an invitation, so inexplicably compelling that they "immediately" let go of their present lives in order to respond to it. Who would have imagined? Who could have known? Did they notice the young rabbi come striding close to water's edge? Did they wonder? Were they skeptical? *What were they thinking?!* Listen for God's word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the first chapter at the 14th verse (found on p. 35 of the New Testament portion of the chapel/pew Bibles if you wish to read along).

MARK 1:14-20

The gospel of Mark is famously brief on detail, painting in short, declarative sentences the essential outline of Jesus' earthly ministry from baptism to empty tomb. Shortly after rising up out of the waters of baptism, Jesus announces the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Understand, this is the language of revolution to people under the thumb of Rome.

Things are going to change, and Jesus is the one to initiate those changes. And the first thing he does is to call a group of people to be his disciples.

And what a group!able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! ...offer profound insights in prayer....out loud! Spiritual superheroes, confident...yet humble! Well, not exactly. None of the gospels sugarcoat their picture of the disciples, who remain pretty much clueless about Jesus from start to finish. Time and time again, they will disappoint him and misunderstand his mission. On those last awful days, when he is arrested and put on trial for his life, they abandon him all together, retreating into self-protective cover. Is this any way to inaugurate a new day? Are these the kind of people you want to spread your word, do your work, wear your name?

Apparently for Jesus, it is, and they are, for he chooses not to do anything without them. He calls them, and sticks with them, and shares everything with them until they get it. And we know the story, as far it goes. When Jesus joins hands with ordinary people, extraordinary things happen. The blind see. The lame walk, no, dance. Mountains move. Roadblocks crumble. The dead are raised. Enslaved peoples breathe free. The broken-hearted are comforted. Children cheer, and old people weep for joy. Earth rolls on with hope restored.

Jesus' earthly ministry began with a declaration of revolution: *The kingdom of God has come near; turn around and believe in the good news.* The second thing he does is to approach a couple of guys fishing and say, "Follow me." And what do they do? They follow. Here's where I'd really like to get into their heads, to figure out why they said yes. It would be entirely reasonable, not to mention responsible, to ask a few questions before you entirely disrupt your life: Who are you? Where are you going? What are we going to be doing? But there's none of that. We might surmise that something in Jesus' authoritative summons struck a chord with their own yearning and questions. Maybe they anticipated that fishing for people would be more satisfying than the kind of fishing they knew so well. But there's no biblical evidence to conclude this: they simply go, giving up what they know for something ill-defined at best.

Who knows why God chooses to work in the world like this? If you're divine, you hardly need a bunch of amateurs to muck things up. But here is Jesus calling a couple of ordinary people to be his disciples. *I'm going to change the whole world, transform reality, and guess who's going to help me?* [William Willimon, in *Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 34, No. 1, p. 18]

The point is, disciples of Jesus are made, not born. Maybe Mark wrote it like that to help us see that God is looking –not for Superman (or WonderWoman)—but for human beings with all our flaws and imperfections to be engaged in the divine work of redeeming the earth. God doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called.

And whether we know it or not, that's why we're here this morning. We are here because we were called to be here. Now part of me resists that, because like most contemporary North Americans, I value the freedom to make decisions for myself, to construct my life on the basis of those decisions. But today's text invites us to see it differently, to envision our lives as the product of God's decisions, of plans made for us by the One who loves and saves us. It's different than deciding, for example, to go to a play or to the orchestra. You are in church because you are called. We move toward the kingdom of God by invitation. Because God calls us.

Remember what we say whenever we baptize a person? Whether infant, teenager, or adult, when we initiate them into the Christian life, we declare that the promises of this life are extended to "everyone whom the Lord our God calls." The baptized person (or the parents) vow to follow, to make this faith their own, and to seek the way of Jesus Christ. We splash some water on their heads and say in essence, "God has some work for you. Go out and live your calling." We even dare to call this good news because the saddest thing in all the world is a rudderless life, tossed about by every wind or storm; purposeless, or worse, hell-bent on majoring in the minors.

Which brings us back to Jesus' first disciples. We've already acknowledged that they possessed no special knowledge, no profound insights, no particularly dynamic faith when they left their nets to follow Jesus. All they did was respond to a call, to say yes to an invitation to place themselves under the guidance of this Teacher. To go with him, to learn from him, and then to see what happens.

And that, my friends, is what the church is about. For the past year, a group of Fairmount leaders has been studying what makes churches grow. They've read books, examined research, visited growing congregations and talked with members and pastors. They developed a comprehensive list of recommendations your leadership team is currently considering. Their work was thoughtfully done, and will no doubt yield tremendous benefit for our church by offering new perspectives on historic realities and by identifying new realities that call for new ways and means of "doing church." And yet at the heart of it, their recommendations boil down to an intentional focus on cultivating disciples of Jesus Christ.

Men and women, youth and children who will follow where he leads. Even though we'll be acting on those specific recommendations over the next few months, I invite us today to affirm our calling to be disciples of the living Lord.

Individually, we will grow incrementally into our calling. Certainly making a commitment to worship and to seek God's guidance will take you a long way towards understanding what you are to do and become. But I also think for most if not all of us, there will be specific moments when a question is put to us unmistakably and we are confronted with a choice. Some have spoken of a "leap of faith" where one comes to the end of rational thought, of planning and preparation, of figuring it all out, when one simply says. "Yes." Okay, I'll do it. You never know what exactly you may end up doing, when God is making the call.

But I am constantly amazed at what happens when you respond. An attorney in our congregation saw a notice in one of his professional journals outlining the need in Katrina-devastated areas for legal aid and advice. He spent a week in December assisting victims with insurance claims, federal emergency support resources, and similar tasks. I know a young woman who sat in worship and heard a witness about our Stephen Ministry and the need for volunteers to be trained and to serve in this ministry of compassion and presence with people in transition. Even though she wasn't sure how she could respond, given her job and parenting responsibilities, she told me that "she had to do it." Not long ago I was sitting with the decision-making board for Heights Youth Club. This Fairmount-initiated enterprise will convert a church that had closed its doors into a Boys & Girls Club, a safe and positive place for after-school learning, recreation, and character development. You know that all the hurdles with the City have been cleared, and that fundraising has been strong. But delays and asbestos abatement have also added to the cost of the project. We had to decide whether or not to move forward when not all the needed money was in hand. We were realistic about our anxiety, our commitment to fiscal responsibility. Finally, one man spoke. This Fairmouter has been a big league business man, someone who knows the ropes and could never be mistaken for a Pollyanna. "This has always been about faith. This is the right thing to do for the kids. We gotta go forward."

Superman? Not really. Just someone who heard a call. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh gets it right when he comments, "The real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth." This is the place, now is the time, we are the ones.

Friends, is there a place in your life right now where you are at a crossroads? Maybe it's only the faint rumbling of changes that will come

later. Maybe you feel restless with the way things are in your life, or uncertain about your next step. Or maybe you *know* what God is calling you to do, and you're afraid you just can't go there.

Well, this moment is as good as any to say "yes"—whether for the first or four hundredth time. "Follow me" Jesus beckons. And we'll never know what abundant life we might be living, what great faith we might be growing, what unimaginable adventures we might be in for....*until we follow.*

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO DO FAR MORE ABUNDANTLY THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER.
AMEN.

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