

“Fish Story”

Mark 1:14-20

January 21, 2018

They were, presumably, minding their own business, doing what they were supposed to be doing, there along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Peter and Andrew were casting a net out into the water; and, James and John, were mending their nets. All in all, a perfectly normal day for fishermen from Galilee.

And then the incredible happens. In fact, what happens is so preposterous, so unlikely, that it argues for the authenticity of the story. I mean, who could make this up, right?

This man walks up to the first set of brothers. In all likelihood, they had very little, if any, idea who he was. Oh, they may heard rumors of another prophet attracting crowds, but these guys came along from time to time, no one and nothing to take seriously. Until this man says a very peculiar thing to them. It's more a command than anything else. He says: *“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”*

Now, would you just put yourself in the position of Simon Peter and Andrew there on the lake shore. Had it been you and me, we would probably have looked at this man, looked at each other, chuckled, shaken our heads, rolled our eyes and gone back to fishing ...*for fish!* *“Follow me and I will make you fish for people?”* Come on! Who says stuff like that?

But, that is not what happened according to Mark. And, notice, the *very next verse* begins, **“Immediately...”** There are no intermediate verses describing any kind of reaction at all; no discussion between the brothers, no dropping by the house to pick up a few things, no tending to unfinished business. Instead it says, **“Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”**

Now, come on, that's pretty strange. Why would they do that? Ah, but it gets even better, or stranger. This man, whoever he was, does it *again!* This time it's James and John, in the boat...with their father. Notice that their father, Zebedee, is named *twice*. Mark wants to be sure we understand these two are not only leaving their boat, their livelihood, and the only life they've ever known; they're *leaving their father sitting there in the boat!* What must have he been thinking? *“Wait a minute, you two! Where do you think you're going? We've got work to do here, nets to mend...”* **“Immediately, they left the boat and their father and followed Jesus.”** Just...like...that!

What a peculiar story! Now, the question is: What could have caused these fishermen to simply drop everything and leave, **“immediately,”** to follow this man they probably didn't even know? How can we explain that rationally? Well, we can't...there is no *rational* explanation for it, but there is an explanation.

This is one of the clearest examples in the scripture of **the power which the Word has to cause a complete and immediate change in a person's life**, to completely turn that life

around, move a person in a surprising direction, even one that is completely at odds with the **normal course of her or his whole life!** Don't believe it, ask St. Paul to tell you about the day he got knocked off his horse! It was the word. Nothing else can explain what happened on the shores of Galilee that day. It was the **Word of God, in the flesh, incarnate in the person of Jesus.** You remember how the Gospel according to John begins: "In the beginning was **the Word**...and the **Word was God.**" It was nothing less than the power of God himself on the shores of the Sea of Galilee that day. It was the **Word** that did this. And, the **Word** was **Jesus Christ.**

And just what were the words Mark says Jesus was preaching to the people? "*The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe.*" Remember the literal meaning of the Word "repent:" It means to be turned around, and so they were: they were turned around with their backs to the Sea of Galilee and all that had been familiar to them, and turned to face the Word of God that stood before them in the flesh. And the only possible explanation is: it was the **power of the Word** that did this.

It was the **power of the Word** that brought an enigmatic Nazarene and four scruffy fishermen from the obscurity of a Galilean lake to the founding of a church and a faith that covers the globe 2000 years later. And it is the **power of the Word** that today still calls millions to this same faith in a resurrected Jesus.

This same **power of the Word** *continues* to do its work among us as well,

- we who have already been called;
- we who have already turned around;
- we who have already followed.

The work of the Word is an *ongoing* work; it is a *continuing* work. The kingdom *is coming*, it is a work *in process*, and *we are a part of that process, a part of that work.* That's the **power of the Word** at work among us: we who have already been called to follow, like Peter and Andrew, James and John.

But what happened on that lake shore was only the beginning of the story for those four fishermen. The day when Jesus called them was the day that two very important things happened:

One, they were called by the power of the Word.

And, two, **They entered into the most intense struggle of their lives: the struggle with the Word.**

There were times when they resisted the power of the Word, and God permitted them to do so; times when they literally ran away from it, and God permitted them to do so; times when they flatly denied it, and God permitted them to do so. The same Peter who dropped everything to follow Jesus, would later say, "*I don't even know the man.*" and God permitted him to do so. They were called by the Word and, at the same time, entered into a struggle with that Word.

The same two things happened to you and me (near a much smaller body of water) on the day of our baptism.

We were called by God to be his own.

And, **we were plunged into the most intense struggle of our lives, the struggle with the Word.**

Now maybe you don't see yourself as engaged in that struggle. And, that may be because we wrongly but insistently, picture ourselves as people who are essentially good engaged in a struggle with trying to stay that way – basically good people struggling against the evil in the world. **That is wrong.** And, just in case you were planning to say, "I enjoyed the sermon." the truth we don't want to hear about ourselves is that **it is we who are insistently evil as over against the Word that is good.**

Let's be honest. **We do not want it.** For the demand which the Word makes upon us is **to give up ourselves, and this we do not want to do.** This struggle with the Word is apparent even among us, you and I, who call ourselves the Church. Because, while we call ourselves the church, and gather here to say so, we still struggle...

...between caring for the poor and hungry...and our own comfort;

...between sharing our wealth with others in need...and keeping the money for ourselves;

...between acting in love toward our neighbor...and shunning those whose ethnicity, or politics, or sexuality differ from our own.

Look, I know what I'm talking about because I'm talking about myself...and, yes, I'm talking about you, too. St. Paul said it so well in Romans: "*I do not understand my own actions. That which I would do, I do not do, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.*" (Rom. 7:15-17)

That's the struggle: we can will what is right, but we cannot do it. It is the struggle between humility and pride, between love and selfishness, between suffering and comfort, between that Word which demands we give up *self*...and *self*! And God permits the struggle to go on. Why? If the **Word** is so powerful, Jesus, then why don't you just say the Word!

Why? Because the very essence of the struggle is that we are by nature resistant to God saying the Word to us and bringing that struggle to an end. We do not, by our very nature, want to hear the Word because it demands of us that we give up self and that is what we do not want to do.

And, yet, the Word has us hooked, doesn't it? And we cannot get away from it. The Word has been said to us, splashed all over us, "You are baptized." That's when the struggle begins. Ah, we never should have let 'em baptize us! Now we are hooked by the Word like a fish on a line, and like a fish on a line, every time we feel the tension of the line we resist it and continue to pull away, thrash about. It is the nature of a hooked fish to thrash as though it knew that, once dragged onto the shore, it would surely die. And that is exactly what will happen to us, and that is what the scripture means when it talks of "*dying to self*,"

for that is precisely what awaits us at the end of the line; and it is precisely that which we resist with our last ounce of strength. But there comes a time, when there is no strength left to thrash about, no will to resist is left, and it is then that we discover *that to die to self, means to be given new life in Christ.*

So, what can *we* do? We can do *nothing* except ask God's graceful intervention to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, to haul us in, thrashing, up out of our deep waters. That's what we are doing here today, we are struggling to make self less and make God more. John 3:30: "God must increase; I must decrease." That's the struggle.

Martin Luther knew the struggle well when he wrote these words to one of his great hymns (LBW295).

Out of the depths I cry to you,
O Father hear me calling.
Incline you ear to my distress,
in spite of my rebelling.

It is in God that we shall hope,
and not in our own merit.

We rest our fears in his good Word,
and trust his Holy Spirit.

Please stand
and let us sing...