

The Story of a Calling

Meta

Date: January 21, 2024

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Jeremiah 3:19–4:4

Psalm 130

I Corinthians 7:17–24

Mark 1:14–20

Opening

Read biographies. Get the stories of saints into your soul. That was the passionate instruction given me by a mentor when I was an aspiring pastor at the age of 22. Dr. Dennis Kinlaw of Asbury College was a consummate scholar and pastor. I could listen to him talk for hours about Scripture, philosophy, the church fathers, and pastoral life. He gave me a reading list for those topics and made sure to add the category of biography. Read life stories for your faith.

Naturally, one wants to know which books to buy and begin reading. I need to make sure I'm reading the right stories, the best biographies! Twenty years and then some from those days, I'm still drawn to biographies of saints. But over these past few decades, I've discovered, too, that the life stories I need most don't require new purchases. They're given to me in Holy Scripture.

Scripture doesn't give us biographies in the conventional sense. Mark's Gospel isn't really a biography of Jesus—he doesn't give us details of the Lord's life until age 30. But the life stories are still there if we read Scripture carefully, making connections from one scene to the next.

When the lectionary selects episodes from the Gospels, we typically meditate on one scene, and that's good. But sometimes one scene becomes amplified when we find connections with events that come before and after an episode. When we trace the arc of a life; when we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, to give us more details of a life story, we may hear the Holy Spirit speaking anew through ancient and familiar stories.

So come with me to the Sea of Galilee this morning. Let us look closely at this scene, but let us place this scene on a broader plane. Our Gospel story this morning is certainly a discipleship story, first and foremost. But it is also a family story, though we may not perceive it.

Ashore at the Sea of Galilee

Mark opens his Gospel, introducing us to John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. This is not a life story of Jesus, but it is a good news story—a gospel story—of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As Mark's story progresses and Jesus enters Galilee, the scene changes and four new figures take center stage. We meet two pairs of brothers, Andrew and Simon Peter, in one harbor along the Sea of Galilee, then the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, a little further along the shoreline.

Before we meet these pairs of brothers, Mark introduces to Jesus, the Preacher. Here's his sermon, the heart of his Gospel message—the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel. His presence brings the kingdom of God near. The heart of discipleship means the call to repentance; it means the call of faith. Before we meet Andrew and Peter, we know what the call of discipleship means—it means repentance; it means total trust in Jesus.

This gospel message is not spoken to simply get their attention—it will define their apprenticeship. You may have heard about the famous study regarding practice and the mastery of a skill among musicians. It has been said that a musician must practice 10,000 hours before she masters the complex skills and techniques of her instrument. Christ has come to call Israel to repentance, and these pairs of brothers are the firstfruits of that repentance. To walk closely with Jesus means an invitation into the school of repentance. To accept his call means they must master the skills of repentance—of turning from their habits, their logic, their ambitions, to accept the habits, logic, and ambition of Jesus' kingdom.

The gospel message is not only a renunciation, a turning away. It means believing the gospel, trusting Jesus Christ is the Son of God. It means believing the gospel when their Lord and master comes face to face with a legion of demons. It means trusting their Lord when they are about to lose their very lives on a storm-tossed Sea of Galilee, waters that were their second home. The call of Jesus means training their hearts and minds to trust Jesus Christ is the Son of God in all situations.

There is no easing into the call of discipleship for them. 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' Simon Peter and Andrew were circle casters, throwing weighted nets to encircle a school of fish. It's not difficult to imagine brothers fighting over who was the better circle caster. No matter, mid cast, they hear Jesus of Nazareth summon them from their boats, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers—circle casters—of all people.'

Their answer was immediate, their obedience instantaneous. This was the first, but not the final, test of their trust. We know this story begins well. Remember, it doesn't always remain well. For Peter will fail beyond imagining with a threefold denial of his Lord. He claims he never met the Man who first called him by the Sea of Galilee. Never happened. Peter was an apprentice, not a *master* of repentance and obedience, that day he left his nets with Andrew. He would have to learn repentance after his bitter betrayal in Jerusalem. How fitting that Peter repented, was restored to the Lord Jesus, after the resurrection, than—where else?—the Sea of Galilee? There he was called the first time to repentance. There he was called again to repentance, to believe the gospel anew. Well, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's keep moving along the shoreline.

Follow Me = The Way of Repentance

'Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of my people.' That was the promise, the pledge. It could not be separated from the call to master the skill of repentance. But the kingdom wasn't a

turning away, it was not only a turning toward the Son of God in faith and trust. It was a turning toward those whom the Son of Man came to seek and save—the lost.

I will take that which you know—circle casting for schools of fish—and I will transpose your skills for my purposes. There's nothing wasted, nothing lost in the divine economy. The ordinary skills of our lives, the gifts we've been given, these are the raw materials for Christ's kingdom work. Christ never asks us to become someone we are not; he desires us to become all that he created us to be for his sake, for his kingdom.

For some—for many, even—that means Christ transforms you and he calls you to stay put. As St. Paul counseled the Corinthians, such is the common wisdom for most Christians, 'Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.'¹

But this was not the case with the sons of Zebedee, mending their nets with their father, when Jesus called them to be his disciples. They had to leave their nets, their father, their work, their hired servants *immediately*. That was the only obedient response available for James and John. Immediately they became students of repentance, of faith and trust.

The trust of the brothers Zebedee was, perhaps, more costly. Ok, they have some hired hands, so they're wealthy enough that their father isn't completely abandoned. But how is this anything short of a radical call to radical trust? The call of Jesus prevailed over the claims of family.

And here is where tracing the story of the sons of Zebedee beyond this scene enhances this early episode. The Gospels are silent concerning the life of Papa Zebedee after his sons, James and John, leave their nets to follow Jesus. We don't know how he managed after his boys gave up fishing. But the Gospels are *not* silent about Mama Zebedee. Though she is not mentioned in Mark chapter 1 when her two sons abandon home and trade to become Jesus' students, she appears later in Mark's Gospel story. In fact, Mama Zebedee appears in the Gospels of Matthew and John, too. When we read Matthew, Mark, and John, we learn Mama Zebedee's name—it was Salome.² There are a few Salome's in Scripture, but here we mean the mother of James and John.

Well, that's an interesting piece of Bible trivia, but is there any more meaning here? If you follow the story, there is. What appears to be an abrupt parting with the whole family when Papa Zebedee is left in the boat turns out to be a remarkable family story. Now Mark has some affection for James and John because when he lists the disciples, he tells us the nicknames Jesus gave them—Boanerges, meaning 'Sons of Thunder.' If you ever need biblical evidence that the Lord had a playful spirit, well here's one example, among others. (I once drove through some countryside and happened upon a certain Boanerges Baptist Church. I'd give my vote to a Boanerges Anglican Church.)

Jesus nicknamed James and John 'the sons of thunder' and the boys Zebedee would live up to their names in a later episode.

A few years later, when Jesus was passing through Samaria, he sent James and John as an advance team to prepare the way. The Samaritan village rejected Jesus and James and John said—you may remember it—'Lord, do you want us to call fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' And Jesus rebuked them. Because the gospel means good news. And for the sons of thunder, it meant they

¹ 1 Corinthians 7:20

² Compare Matthew 27:56 with Mark 15:40. Ezra Gould also cites this connection in Gould, Ezra Palmer. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark*. International Critical Commentary. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1922.

would have to learn repentance again. They would have to unlearn the spirit of condemnation and learn the way of patient, longsuffering love. Jesus did not mean to obliterate their thunderous spirit, but to transpose it, to sanctify, to align it with the good news of the kingdom. His calling was not void; he was making them become fishers of men.

James and John's boldness was apparent in Samaria, but also just a few days before our Lord Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Three years have transpired since the Lord called James and John to leave Papa Zebedee at the Sea of Galilee, and then we come to a conversation recorded both in Mark and Matthew between Jesus, James, and John. Mark is notoriously sparing in details, whereas Matthew fills out the narrative a bit more. When we read Matthew 20, just before Palm Sunday, we discover, lo and behold, that the mother of James and John is following Jesus. Salome is there. Let that sink in.

When they left their nets, their hometown, their family, James and John had no assurance that the place and people they love will share the same faith and love in Jesus of Nazareth. But here is Salome—three years later—following Jesus with her boys. It is a wonderful example of that teaching our Lord taught on the Sermon on the Mount, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.' Seek Christ first in your own heart, seek him above all others, above all allegiances. But know that Christ is seeking, searching, and speaking to those you love; who you so desperately want to know and love Christ, too. He is a circle caster of souls and he's training you to become the same.

For the sons of Zebedee, theirs was a story of reaping rewards for their faith and sacrifice, for leaving all to follow Jesus. Here is Salome, their mother, kneeling at the feet of Jesus as he nears Jerusalem. We don't know how or when their mother came to follow Jesus, but like her sons, she, too, was brought into the net of Christ's love. //

But what of this conversation? You may the conversation. Salome, mother of James and John, asks a bold question. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. She's kneeling at the Lord's feet, a sign of her love and respect.

'Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling down she asked something from him. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine may sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your kingdom." 22 But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you are asking!'

Oh, we're a long way from the Sea of Galilee, but we're right back in the school of repentance. Still learning, still unlearning. The boys and their mother, now learning and unlearning *together*. This kind of ambition will not make you become fishers of men and women. This desire for glory will not bring lost souls home. This is not good news. You don't know what you're seeking James and John. Salome, you don't know what you're asking. 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'³ //

³ Mark 10.44, Matthew 20.28

Salome at the Cross and Empty Tomb

If you follow him, you must keep going, keeping following Jesus after your failures. It was true for Peter, James, and John—these thunderous men whom Jesus called to be his apostles. It was also true for Salome.

For the mother of Zebedee doesn't appear in Scripture again until the cross. Mark wants us to know Salome is a witness to the crucifixion with John, her son, and Mary the mother of our Lord. Because that's what it means to follow Jesus. We will have epic failures, embarrassing, foolish words we speak, lessons to learn and unlearn. But will you keep following Jesus to the cross? Matthew tells us of Salome, 'many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph *and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.*'

Salome wasn't just a witness of the crucifixion, and Mark wants us to see that, too. On Easter morning, she's carrying spices to the tomb with Mary Magdalene. She bears spices, expecting to anoint the body of the crucified Jesus. Instead, she will discover an empty tomb. Her sons first met and followed Jesus in Galilee, but she is the first to learn the full gospel—that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near, trampling down death by death. *This* is so much greater than any seat of honor for her sons. *This* miracle is what will make a believer become a fisher of men and women. *This* is the kingdom of heaven come near.

For good reason, we have many men named Peter and Andrew, James and John. But I believe that there are far too few Salome's in the world. And let me take this opportunity to cast my vote for any parents that are blessed with the gift of a newborn daughter, consider naming her Salome!

Oh, when we look back on the sacrifices we make to follow Jesus, can they compare with the blessings and rewards he's given in return? When you look back on your failures, your embarrassing moments, can they compare with the grace, mercy, and glory of Jesus Christ and his love? No! *Far from our knowledge, our skills, our gifts, we become fishers of men and women because we witness the glory of God. When you witness the power of Christ's death and resurrection—this makes you become fishers of men and women.* So keep learning and unlearning; get up after you fall. Sometimes we fall together, like the Zebedee family did outside Jerusalem. If we fall together, let us get up together. Keep walking, even though we walk the royal way of the cross. For through the cross, we become witnesses of his resurrection. That's the gospel we've witnessed and it's the story we have to tell—all for the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.