

Risky Calling

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.

¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

This story of Jesus calling these brothers is so compelling that it is hard not to focus on the quick response of the disciples. One biblical scholar quips – it is almost as if Mark hits the fast forward button on the gospel – it comes at us so fast. Jesus begins his public ministry; he proclaims that God is doing something new in the world – not last week, not tomorrow, but now – and then he immediately starts calling people to go along with him. The sheer breathlessness of the moment and of the movement is staggering.

We know so little about these fishermen except for their names and relations. How old were they? Were they in the market for a new job? What on earth did father Zebedee think as he watched his sons walk away leaving the family business behind? We don't know much of anything, except that, into the midst of people living their lives pretty much the way you and I try to lead our lives – from day to day hopefully with as few surprises as possible – here comes Jesus with news about how God's time is now. And if you want to be part of it, you've got to leave something behind.

Jesus calls; they follow. It seems as simple as that. The urgency and the immediacy of the moment is stunning. This part of the story – how these brothers just get up and go after Jesus so captures our imagination that it is hard to focus on anything else other than their hasty and nimble response. Which is completely understandable because we just don't make career decisions – or frankly, any decision that way. Whether it's changing a job, or making a big purchase, or deciding whether to fly or to drive, we weigh the pros and cons, we consider our options, we calculate the financial implications, and we try to measure the risks before we take one step forward. But the way each of the gospels records the call of Jesus upon these fishermen, there appears to be no such calculation. They just follow. Not only that, as Mark makes abundantly clear, there are known risks involved in following Jesus.

Today, given what is going on in our country and our world, I think the risk of discipleship is what begs our attention in this text rather than pondering the psyche of those first disciples. To follow Jesus Christ is to put oneself at risk. We are warned of the risk at the very beginning of this text, in the introductory sentence which could be heard as a throw-away line, on our way to the main event of Jesus' call and the disciples' willing get-up-and-go response.

Remember how this call story began? *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee...* After John is arrested... Just last Sunday we heard how all of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem were going out into the wilderness to be baptized by John. Even Jesus, to whom John's prophecy pointed, went down to the river to submit to John's baptism. All those people, including Jesus, were drawn to John's ministry because it challenged the principalities and powers of the day. He implored people to repent of the customary ways of being in the world – of caring only for themselves, of putting others down, of shunning the sick and the poor and to reorient their lives for divine purposes instead. So when this text begins with John's arrest, we are being warned that to follow Jesus is risky business, because Jesus continues what John began with even more force and power.

To join Jesus in working for God's Kingdom puts us at risk – because we do it in a world very much like the world of John and Jesus – a world of political oppression, of violent extremism, of division among people due to class and race and creed, and of power and principalities that counter the ways of God. Ours is a calling to name and to resist these savage forces at work in the world, to reorient our lives in service to God's good work of love and mercy and justice. Because John the Baptizer went to jail for it, and we know what will happen to Jesus, resisting oppressive powers and working for the common good is indeed a risky calling. In our heated political climate it can put us at odds with neighbors, even family members. In a city where just about anyone can carry a gun, this work can call us into dangerous places. In a country where violent, white supremacist

extremists have recently surged in great number, under a misguided claim of Christian righteousness, every single one of us is being called better to understand the racism within us, and to work to dismantle its systemic oppression in almost every sphere of American life.

This familiar text from Mark's gospel is calling us anew, as one theologian put it: to repent, to reorient our lives in light of it, and to resist everything that disfigures our common life and God's good creation. To re-envision a life in which hierarchies and subjective categories based on race, class and gender are washed away in the waters of baptism. ¹

Erin Hunter, Professor of Christian Ethics, notes: "So we follow this Christ as those who simultaneously live in a particular political reality. We are invited to nudge, cajole, and work so that our institutions enact the good news of God's coming in Christ. As the Gospel of Mark reminds us, we need willingly to turn from our usual patterns, from expected and familiar habits of organization, in order faithfully to profess in our common life the actuality of God's reign." She concludes: "To do so presses us to consider what others hear and see in our own call *to repent and believe.*" ²

I think that we heard the very best articulation of this calling just this past Wednesday from the youngest person ever to deliver a poem for the Inauguration of a United States President. When interviewed about being invited to this honor, the twenty-two-year-old poet, Amanda Gorman talked about how hard this past year has been and how she felt called to the task. Like so many of our young people, she hated having to take all her classes on Zoom and missed her college graduation due to the pandemic. In the days in which the Capital building was raided by insurrectionists, and the death count to COVID exceeded four hundred thousand, she crafted her poem mindful that it

¹ Rodger Gench, *Presbyterian Outlook* online, 1/19/21.

² Erin Hunter, *Connections, Year B, Vol. 1*. P. 180.

was an opportunity to offer balm to those suffering right now. She said in the interview: the “purpose is to help people, and to shed a light on issues that have far too long been in the darkness.... she went on, “this moment has called me for a reason, so all I can do is show up and do my absolute best.” Her “best” was to call forth a vision that resonates with the vision before us as we are called to follow Jesus.³ Amanda Gorman challenged us to fulfill our own faithful calling, saying, in part:

We are striving to forge our union with purpose.
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors,
characters and conditions of man.
And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us,
but what stands before us.
We close the divide because we know
to put our future first
we must first put our differences aside.
We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms to one another.
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true.
That even as we grieved, we grew.
That even as we hurt, we hoped.
That even as we tired, we tried.
That we’ll forever be tied together, victorious.
Not because we will never again know defeat,
but because we will never again sow division.
Scripture tells us to envision
that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid.

³ Amanda Gorman interview, *Vogue* online.

If we're to live up to our own time,
then victory won't lie in the blade,
but in all the bridges we've made.
That is the promise to glade,
the hill we climb, if only we dare. ⁴

Friends, we dare to follow Jesus Christ, because against all the cultural calling to sew division and build walls, we are called to make bridges – to reach across the divide and show forth the love, compassion and justice of God. Even in our current isolation – we cannot escape, and numb ourselves to the pain, the violence and the suffering in the world. We cannot make peace with the world as it is. We are called to live as if the realm of God is a reality – taking shape in our midst, taking shape through the way we live our lives, taking shape as we ourselves risk following the One who calls us, Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

⁴ Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, written for the Inauguration of President Joseph B. Biden, 1/20/21.