

## *A Moment and a Lifetime of Faithfulness*

Third Sunday after Epiphany  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

**“Becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.”** Those words caught my eye when I read them last week, and I wanted to share them with you. “Becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.” A United Methodist pastor from Minnesota named Elton Brown wrote those words about our Gospel lesson today.

They are important words to absorb because the story of Andrew and Simon Peter, James and John, being called by our Lord Jesus to follow him appears to describe only a single moment of turn-around and change for these fishermen. Their willingness to follow this itinerant rabbi, dropping everything in the midst of their daily work the instant he calls them, seems impressive. I know that as I grew up, my pastor, my Sunday school teachers, even the hymns that we sang, pointed to this pivotal moment where, when called by Jesus, the disciples *immediately* followed. No putting Jesus on hold. No suggesting, “Let me get back to you on that.” No time even to ask questions or think things through. Jesus says to the disciples, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” They go. And I was made to understand that my discipleship was to be modeled after that.

Becoming a faithful Christian disciple **does** take just a moment. Because sometimes we have just a moment to respond to Jesus’ call. That call comes at unexpected times, and often there is an urgency for an answer. We are confronted with the proverbial fork in the road, and the time is now to choose the path. It will either be the way of Christ, or not.

Simply take one example of many: Blasted with a barrage of angry words from another, we can, in that moment, choose the path of peace, offering civility toward and reconciliation with that other. Or not, choosing instead to let loose with our own barrage of anger in return.

You know, I was thinking about that US Airways pilot who, on January 15, managed to crash-land his Airbus onto the Hudson River, saving the lives of his 155 passengers and crew. In some ways, all his education, training, and experience prepared Capt. Chesley Sullenberger for that moment. In other ways, nothing could possibly have prepared him for that moment. But the moment arrived anyway. The fork in the road was there before him. The time was now to choose a path. No making another pass in the air while things were thought through. No handing the responsibility to others in the cockpit. No taking a survey of the passengers as to the best course of action. It’s either crash-land at nearby Teterboro Airport, having to pass dangerously low over a densely populated area—or land in the icy-cold water of the Hudson and take the risk that such a maneuver brings. Witnesses say the captain stated, “My aircraft” and he took control of the plane and landed it in the river. The moment came, in all its unpredictability and urgency, and he chose. He chose well.

Mark, in his Gospel, sounds like an alarm clock going off, insistent that the moment has arrived. Read the Gospel of Mark, and things sure seem to happen quickly around Jesus. The sense of urgency is obvious. Jesus shows up, and *immediately* people are healed of their diseases. *At once* demons are cast out. *Then* Jesus moves on to the next town. *As soon* as he arrives at a village, people come out to him to listen to his teachings, amazed at his authority. *Immediately* something miraculous happens once more. Just try to catch your breath at the rapid pace this Gospel moves. See, Mark is writing how this person Jesus is the fulfillment *now* of prophets' words centuries ago. This person Jesus is the kingdom of God come near *now*—the rule of God in all its righteousness and goodness and power breaking into the world, disrupting the *status quo*, making things new again *now*. Wherever Jesus is, the moment has come, the time is fulfilled, God's kingdom is present. Understand this, and Mark's Gospel makes much more sense.

What Jesus is doing in today's lesson is calling the fishermen to be a part of this kingdom that has drawn near in him. Not just in order to be recipients of God's blessings, but also to share those blessings, declare them to others, and participate in the great work Jesus is doing. Thus, Andrew and Simon Peter, James and John, having been asked to follow Jesus and fish for people, find themselves at a fork in the road. The moment has come. They must choose a path. It will either be the way of Jesus Christ, or not. It will either be living the kingdom life in this world, or not. In one sense, their experience at being fishermen prepares them for this moment. In another sense, nothing could possibly have prepared them for the call Jesus makes to them.

Of course, there is much stumbling along the path. Reading further into Mark, we witness not only the disciples' occasional success at ministering in Jesus' name, and their desire to learn more from him, but also their abysmal failures, their paralyzing doubt and fear, their rejection and denial of their Lord.

So it is with us. These moments come, standing before us, demanding our response. In our world today we are confronted by conflict and turmoil, poverty and sickness, hatred and violence, selfishness and greed. Sometimes our previous experiences and the nurturing our faith has received over the years prepare us for these moments. Sometimes it seems as if nothing could possibly have prepared us. Yet we must choose. The way of Jesus Christ, or not. A generous spirit, an open hand, a healing word, a courageous stand. Or not. In those moments, we must place everything, including ourselves, in the hands of God, that God will indeed help us to choose the path faithfully, yet forgive us when we stumble. As it reads in our psalm: "*He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress where I will not be shaken.*"

Now recall that Pastor Brown said "**Becoming a faithful Christian Disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.**" It isn't as if, having made a choice, having taken one of the paths of that fork, that our discipleship is now complete. When Jesus calls the fishermen from Galilee to be his disciples, he isn't simply asking them to add one more item to their to-do list. He is calling them to a whole new way of life. A literal translation of Jesus' call in Mark here is "*Follow me and I will make you to become fishers.*" See, it's not a task given to them, but rather, a new identity. Being a follower of Christ is not something extra we tack onto the already busy schedules we lead, something we mark on the calendar for Sunday morning, something that

can be conveniently postponed in the event of bad weather, bad back, bad hair or whatever. God's kingdom has come near in Jesus Christ, and he is calling us to a total reorientation of our lives. This is not a short-term commitment. We are disciples for the long haul. Our participation in the work of the kingdom is to be on-going, not occasional or infrequent. Our taking on Jesus' ministry in our daily life is to be intentional, not haphazard. Our discipleship is not a light we switch on and off when we feel like it. It is a light which must remain on, shine bright, and reach out into dark places where the kingdom is most needed, and such a light must be lit beginning now.

When the presidents of our United States are inaugurated, we hear eloquent and inspiring words from our new leaders. These words are intended to move the people of our nation to great acts of selflessness and service and justice. Our history is full of such magnificent speeches. There is Lincoln's first exhortation just prior to a bloody civil war that evoked memories of what a union can be, and appealed to the "better angels of our nature . . ." His second inaugural address, near war's end, called for "malice toward none . . . charity for all . . ." There is FDR's declaration in the midst of a dark economic depression that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." And there is President Obama's pronouncement that ". . . we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task." We hold onto words such as these for direction on our national path.

But there were other eloquent and inspiring words as well at this most recent inauguration. The inaugural poet, Elizabeth Alexander, in her simple, straight-forward poem *Praise Song for the Day* said this:

*What if the mightiest word is love?  
Love beyond marital, filial, national.  
Love that casts a widening pool of light.*

Ultimately, isn't that Jesus' call to you and me? To wield his powerful word of love and flood the darkness with his healing light. This is our ministry for the long haul, our lifetime participation in the work of God's kingdom and in Jesus' name.

And the moment has arrived. **AMEN.**