

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.

BEING PRESENT IN THE PRESENT

Most of us are familiar with contracts. Usually they are work-related; we sign a contract spells out our responsibilities and the responsibilities of our employer for a period of time. We also speak of a marriage contract which we articulate at our wedding – for better or worse, richer or poorer, till death do us part. Regardless of whatever contract we enter, we do so with some sense of gravity. We may enter marriage joyfully, but the marriage proposal is something we consider seriously before either popping the question or saying “I do.” Before we sign a contract with an employer we read all the fine print, and if possible we demand certain provisions, we negotiate the contract.

And there are probably times under the terms of any contract that you wish you had not signed or said, “I do,” times when you ask yourself, “What have I gotten myself into?” I recall many times saying or thinking that as I was fulfilling my contractual obligations in the United States Army, particularly early on. I had signed the contract not out of some strong sense of patriotism, though I did and still do love my country. I had signed because the Army and I had come to an agreement; I would honorably serve four years active duty in a location they would determine, and they would pay for all my past education loans, which was for me a considerable and weighty sum – I had not only borrowed money to pay for my undergraduate work but also to pay for two years of graduate school, and despite the knowledge that I could be debt-free in four years there were numerous times in my first several months of military service that I wondered if it was worth it. Often I worried if I would be deployed in some combat zone where people were trying to kill me, and often I had regrets that I had not studied harder and done better in school so that I would have secured a decent job in the private sector and been able to steadily pay off my college debts.

That is what usually happens whenever we make some commitment; we fear the future and we regret the past, a lot of “what ifs” and “if onlys.” What if they send me to Kuwait? If only I had studied harder. These questions can plague us when we’re under a marriage contract as well, particularly in the really rough times, and we all have those times. We see things in our spouse that we hadn’t seen before, so we worry about our future and question whether we made the right decision.

And this is why we may have difficulty with today's Gospel lesson. Jesus walking along the lakeside telling Simon and Andrew and James and John to "follow me," and having them drop what they're doing and follow Jesus...*forever*. These guys would spend the rest of their lives serving their "master" and teaching others to do the same, and all this because Jesus said, "Follow me"? We look at our lives and our work and our families and we tell ourselves that we cannot follow so blindly. Furthermore we can justify why we don't follow the way Simon or Andrew or James or John followed; it's right for me to provide for my wife and children. It's right for me to work for my employer. It's right for me to remain in this community and serve this community. I can't just drop everything and follow Jesus wherever he takes me for the rest of my life.

And so we spiritualize this passage and tell ourselves that Jesus isn't demanding that we give up all that we're doing, leave our home and job community to follow him. To follow means to obey, to love God and to love others and to do this for the rest of our lives, and this is something we *can* commit to. I agree with this understanding; that's what Jesus means when he says "follow me." We can keep our commitments to job and family and friends and community AND we can follow Jesus by loving and serving God.

But here again we run into a snag. We look at the magnitude of the command, to follow Jesus from this point forth to the end of our lives, and we still doubt ourselves. We look at our past and see our lack of commitment, our failure to love others and love God, and we project that into the future and say, "there's no way I can live up to this commitment." Right now things may be going well – I'm sitting here in church and my aunt is not harassing me, my children aren't fighting, my boss is not calling me and threatening to fire me for not finishing that proposal. But what about tomorrow? What about the next day? What about the rest of my life? Wouldn't it be hypocritical for me to commit to following Jesus knowing how likely I am to slip up in the coming days?

But what I propose you do to take some of the shock out of this passage is to think of the present only. I doubt if Simon or Andrew or James or John thought of Jesus' invitation to follow him as an invitation to follow him forever and ever, from that day forward. We assume that they did because we have hindsight and we know that that is indeed what happened, so when we hear Jesus say, "Follow me" we think of it as a lifelong obligation, like a marriage proposal, and we're not so sure about diving in to that kind of commitment. Let's look upon Jesus' invitation as a present invitation, and let us just try to be in Jesus' presence at this moment and not let our minds immediately transport us into a very uncertain future. Let's be in Christ's presence at the present moment.

That, I believe, is why many of you come here, to church. The worship is that one hour of the week that you can take your mind off that past and off the future, because Christ enables you to do just that. In Christ you have assurance that your sins are forgiven, so the past doesn't haunt you. In Christ you have assurance of eternal life, so the future need not frighten you. Here, at this time, in this place, you can be completely at peace in the full presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course you can be in Christ's presence outside the church as well, but it can be a little tricky to stay in that presence, as someone reminds you of a deadline or of a past transgression, and you end up with that unsettled "what if" or "if only" mindset. It takes a lot of discipline to remain in Christ's presence with all the distractions banging on the wall.

And so let this be your sanctuary. Just accept Jesus' invitation to follow him at this precise moment and who knows? Like Simon and Andrew and James and John you may long to dwell in his presence from this moment forward. You may not want to leave. But being in Christ's presence is not an invitation to escape but rather to engage. The responsibilities of work and family are all part and parcel of your calling as a Christian. And so remain in his presence as you do what needs to be done, and then return here on Sunday to give God praise and worship for a purposeful life, for the duties and responsibilities that you have fulfilled, and see that they were all part of God's plan, because Christ was there with you as you were fulfilling them. Dwell in his presence always, and let joy of his presence fill you.