

Epiphany 3B, January 24, 2021, St. Anne's
Jonah 3:1–5, 10; Psalm 62:5–12; 1 Corinthians 7:29–31; Mark 1:14–20

What would make *you* drop everything and pursue an entirely new life? A great job offer or new career? A marriage proposal? The chance to make a difference in another part of the world? What would it take to prompt you to leave *everything* you know for something entirely different? What would make **you** drop everything and follow an itinerant preacher proclaiming the kingdom of God is come near?

For me that's the question that pops up in today's gospel. Why **do** Simon and Andrew, and then James and John after them, just *literally* abandon *everything* to follow Jesus? According to our gospel, Jesus just says, "Follow me" and immediately, they leave their families, their livelihood, their responsibilities and *follow him!* I suspect most of us have a hard time even *imagining* ourselves doing what these first disciples do. And the text gives us no clue to what's going on inside their heads when they receive this unexpected invitation. All we can say with any certainty, is that "the kingdom of God" has broken into their lives in Jesus' call. They are called by God to go on a holy adventure – and **they go**.

Biblical stories often frustrate us by refusing to provide the details *we'd* like to hear. I think most of us would prefer the kind of version of the story that someone like say, John Grisham would give. If *John Grisham* had written Mark, we'd have some background on the future disciples, what frustrations and dreams they had before Jesus turns up, we'd overhear a little dialogue between Simon and Andrew concerning Jesus. Jesus would give them some reason for taking such a radical step and, by the time the action takes place, it would all be neat and clear *why* they did what they did. But that *isn't* the way **Mark** tells it. As is customary with

Mark, details are very few, which means there's a lot more we **don't** know, than we do. And clearly that was intentional. And, in honestly, probably far closer to *reality* than the neat kind of fiction that we might like. I don't know about you, but *my* life hasn't read like a John Grisham novel either. Even in *hindsight*, my own motivation for doing or not doing something is *not always* crystal clear.

So maybe Mark is just telling it like it is. As our story starts, life for these four is probably stable and reasonably comfortable – Peter and the rest are living in a relatively *prosperous* area that had a big fishing industry. The Galilee was a major exporter of fish in that day and these men own their own boats. So we're not talking here about poverty stricken desk-hands living hand to mouth – people who have nothing to lose. They're like most of *us* – middle class, probably comfortable but *not* wealthy. And then without warning, while they're in the middle of this ordinary life, Jesus arrives and they get a call to holy adventure. It would *be so easy* to just ignore the call and stay in the boat. By the standards of their time they've actually got a pretty decent life. But, despite that, when out of the blue the call comes - they don't ask *any* of the questions we think *we'd* probably ask: “what's your plan? What are your goals? What's in it for **me**? If I *do* follow you will I be more fulfilled?” This call upsets **all** that was normal in their lives and their culture - and yet, *without hesitation*, they follow Jesus. That's the part that most of us don't 'get'. Because really, who among us would just up and leave our life with no idea where the journey was going to take us? That just feels so... risky - to be without a plan, without all your ducks (or even *any* of your ducks) in a row, before you begin. It's hard for us to imagine answering God's call in such a radical way.

So, when we try to apply this to our own life and faith, we tend to *domesticate* the question of what God might be calling **us** to, as if Simon and his colleagues were just volunteering to help for a night at the winter shelter. But this is about something much greater than just whether or not you occasionally do something charitable or good. It's about something much greater than whether or not you donate some of your money to good causes. It's about what the central **reality is** that drives your life. Is *God*, and God's *vision* for the world, *central* to your life? Or are *you yourself* and your *own* desires and dreams at the centre. Sadly, for most people the answer is the latter. The idea of transforming our life into one that's centred on *God* and God' values instead of ourselves is **profoundly** counter-cultural. To live our life with *God's values* at the centre requires intent and support.

So, the question before us is - what might actually be so **persuasive** that it could compel you to leave the seeming safety of what you know, and venture out in quest of, and service to, something new? Now, that might seem like a big and unanswerable question. But in truth, we've probably all taken steps into the unknown at some level or other before. I know I've certainly had times in my life when I risked taking the 'leap of faith' into the unknown.

For example, I left Penticton at 18 to go to UBC. I had lived my whole life within a few block radius in Penticton. Gone to school with the some of the same people for 12 years. None of my close friends were going to university and no other members of my family who were still alive at that point had attended university. It was quite frankly, scary. But I *did it anyway* because I believed it was the way forward into a life that would be better than the one I was leaving behind. *Was it better?* No way to tell of course since there's no way to know what *would* have

happened if I had decided differently. But that one step into the unknown, that one decision to risk using the gift of intelligence that God gave me to go to university has shaped *everything* important in my life from that point on. And I have never regretted taking it.

I'm sure many of you have some similar story - some time in your life when you risked moving into the unknown. Some of *you* also left home to go to university. Or took the risk of marrying someone, or of bringing a child into the world, or of choosing or changing your career. Some of you left the cities and even the *countries* you grew up in to move to a strange place in search of love, or work or education. So ...what prompted you to make that decision? What helped you to let go of what was familiar and risk the unknown? Now, of course, none of those things are quite the same as what the *disciples* did - you probably did have at least some sort of plan, goal or expectation involved. But, it's still helpful to ask ourselves what the compelling factor *was* that helped you undertake a significant change in direction.

If we think honestly about it, at some level or another, "stepping out in faith" *without any* guarantees of success is an essential part of *every* spiritual journey. Indeed it's a necessary part of a mature *life*. If we are going to be grown-ups, we all, at least occasionally, have to risk stepping out of **our** *comfort* zone or we will never actually accomplish anything. In some senses, life itself is a holy adventure. God is *constantly* calling us to let go of old patterns, old ways of being to *follow Jesus* into *new* life. God even calls us to abandon old patterns of being *the church* and to step out of our comfort zone to follow Jesus to new life as a community. Today, St. Anne's is stepping out into a new way of being church. One that acknowledges that gathering bodily in one space together is not the **ONLY** way to

‘be church’. In today’s world we also have on-line lives, and we need to prepare for a future where we meet people where they **are**. Even if that place is ‘virtual’ rather than in this room.

The good news is we’re never called to perfection but simply to do our best in this moment, and learn from the good we’ve achieved. God calls each of us to leave the safety of the sidelines and to jump into life. It’s a call to choose God’s dream of beauty and hope and love and compassion as the central value of our life. But we have to be willing to **hear** and **respond to** God calling us to new life amid all the clamour of information and other ‘calls’ on us from the world.

So ... what **would** be compelling enough for **you** to take the risk to respond to God’s call to move into new life? And how can we support one another here at St. Anne’s to make taking that leap of faith easier and more compelling? Those are the questions we need to address as we prepare for what the future holds. What would make the time we spend together on Sundays more compelling? What would church need to look like to make it worth more of your precious and limited time? More of your *neighbour’s* time? How can our congregational life enable **you** to become the kind of person you not only *want* to be but even more importantly, **God** is *calling* you to be? Jesus is calling *each* of us to take the risk and follow him to new life. So, the question is, are *you willing* to answer the call and follow?