

Christian Discipleship in Terms of a Fresh Start
Mark 1:16-20

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As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. Mk. 1:19-20

James and John already knew Jesus.

Something in this text stops us at the very beginning, almost keeping us from taking it seriously. It just boggles the mind to think that James and John would go off with a complete stranger, leaving their father in the boat with the work of mending nets half finished. That seems to be the very opposite of what a Christlike life should do. We turn the story into something unbelievable if we assume this was the first time the brothers saw Jesus.

But this was not the first time James and John laid eyes on Jesus. The three of them had known each other a long time, and were perhaps friends and playmates already in childhood. I say that because Jesus, James, and John were first cousins. Their mothers were sisters.¹ So for the brothers James and John to go with Jesus was not a strange happening heretofore unheard of but the start of a new adventure for the three of them.

Now that makes the story much more believable and it brings it quite close to our own situation and need. We are people very much like James and John. We need no introduction to Jesus. We know him. We like him. We have been around him, many of us, for the whole of our lives and for as long as we can remember. We do not need to become disciples. But we could use a fresh start.

James and John are doing what they have always done and believe to be right.

The Gospel According to Mark tells stories very quickly, especially at the beginning of the book, and does not give us much in the way of details. But Mark does give one detail in our scene today. James and John are in the family fishing boat mending their fishing nets.

I do not know what puts fishing nets in need of mending. I suspect repairing nets is a rather routine chore for professionals who fish this way. The weight of a day's catch may put a strain on the nets, causing them to weaken. The elements, the sea and the air, may do a number on them, what with the constant change from soaking to drying out. The need for mending may be a factor of age; old netting may be just not as strong as it once was. Or perhaps now and again a net gets snagged on something, tearing it here or there. Whatever the cause behind the need for mending, apparently all nets need maintenance and good fisherman mend their nets to be ready to try again the next day to do the work they want to do.

¹ This is determined by way of comparing and contrasting the names and descriptions of people listed in Mk.15:40, Jn. 13:25, and Mt. 27:56. See William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1959), p. 30-31.

That is just what James and John were doing. They were mending their nets after working today, whether successfully or unsuccessfully, and they were hoping to use those same nets again tomorrow in the same way toward the same goal. They were doing what they believed to be right and necessary in order to achieve effectiveness. They were doing again what they had always done. They were readying to use once more the same tools that had worked before.

This brings us even closer to our situation and need. Our nets need mending. Here let “nets” refer to the church’s way of working. The elements have done a number on the nets the church has typically used to accomplish its mission and purpose. Now the elements aren’t the sea and the air but the state of the times in which we live. The pandemic has certainly put a strain on the church’s way of working, and the crisis now confronting our nation seems to call for more than we have. But the old nets of church life were already straining before the pandemic and before things got as bad as they have gotten in this country. Changes in society were affecting us. Shrinking memberships and shrinking budgets and aging buildings and aging parishioners were all having an adverse affect on congregations like ours all across our denomination and others. Our nets have been breaking for some time.

And congregations have confronted the new situation mostly by mending their old nets. They have made ready for the new day by working to keep the old netting in good repair so they could keep doing what they have always done.

Jesus comes to the brothers with the invitation to do something different.

Jesus invites James and John to think outside the boat. He comes to them with the gift of imagination and suggests there is something they could be doing other than mending nets. “Stop doing that,” he says, “and follow me.” And they get up and go. They make the fresh start Jesus is inviting to make.

Remember that James and John already know Jesus, so they trust him. They do not know where Jesus is going to lead them. But they know his personality. They know his interests. He may lead them into trouble, but they know if it is trouble it will be good trouble. He isn’t going to coax them into terrorizing the Galilean shore on somebody’s speedboat or to go up and down the beach stealing sunbathers’ picnics. They do not know when they get out of the boat where Jesus is going to take them, but they know Jesus and they trust his lead. They follow his imagination as to what is possible beyond the mending of old nets.

This is close to our situation, too. We are not alone in our situation. We are not by ourselves in this pandemic. We are not by ourselves in the battle to save democracy. We are not up against all the social changes alone. Jesus is with us. He comes to our lakeshore. He comes to our fishing boat. He comes to us. And he comes with his imagination. And he says to us who love him dearly and who want to serve him faithfully, “You can do something other than mend the old nets. You don’t have to do what you’ve always done the way you’ve always done it. There is new usefulness on the horizon.” Faithful discipleship is not necessarily doing the old yet again, but following Jesus, trusting where he will lead even if you do not yet know where that is.

Zebedee encourages his sons to leave the old nets to see where Jesus will lead.

Our typical readings of this story are prone to leave us feeling sorry for Zebedee. Reading it just on the face of it makes it seem poor Zebedee is the victim of inconsiderate sons who leave him with all the work. It hardly seems fair.

But let's remember that Zebedee knew Jesus beforehand, too. He is his uncle. His wife is Mary's sister. He's Jesus' Uncle Zeb. He knows his boys aren't going off with a complete stranger; they are leaving with his nephew.

Now I am speculating here, of course, but I think my take on the scene is reasonable. Old Zebedee wisely saw that a day of net-mending wasn't going to be satisfactory for his boys and that Jesus must have something good in mind. Capturing something of the imagination of Jesus, maybe even before his boys did, Zebedee said he would stay and take care of the old machinery in case it would be needed but the younger ones should follow Jesus wherever he may take them.

This can be close to our experience, too, if we are wise enough to let it. Christ's call to follow him is an invitation to imagine a fresh start. What would happen if we elders no longer insisted that the young mend our nets? What if we did not insist that the young keep our old practices in good repair? What if we were open to the new idea and the new way of working? Instead of keeping in place what was, what used to work, but which has lost effectiveness, what would happen if we encouraged people – old as well as young – to imagine new ways of faithfully following Jesus?

Faithful discipleship is the courage to make a fresh start with Jesus. It is not necessarily doing the old yet again, but following Christ, trusting where he will lead even if you do not yet know where that is.