

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

January 24, 2021 – EPIPHANY 3B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *“Leave Everything for Jesus—Gain it All”*

Jonah 3:1–5, 10 (God calls Jonah to preach repentance to Ninevah)
Psalm 62:6–14 (Trust in God, for He is our refuge and safety, His steadfast love is forever)
1 Corinthians 7:29–31 (We should live as though the world is passing away and Christ is returning)
St. Mark 1:14–20 (Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God and calls Disciples)

In a National Public Radio report on contemporary family life in America, a somewhat exasperated young father described parenthood as “always filled with joy, but sometimes not much fun.” Most parents today could probably relate to his words. Being a father or mother, with all its wonder and joys, is not easy in any era. Good parenting invariably entails a great deal of giving and self-sacrifice, which, as many of you know, is “sometimes not much fun.”

That father’s comment on NPR seems somehow apropos as we reflect this day on our Gospel account of Jesus calling the Disciples—particularly James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Mark’s Gospel tells us: *“Immediately he called”* these two, seemingly inseparable brothers, “and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.” What must Zebedee have thought—or probably sputtered—as he saw his otherwise perfectly sensible sons all of a sudden get up, leave their nets, and abandon their chores? And for what? To follow a little-known itinerant preacher, without so much as a “Tell Mom we won’t be home for dinner”? How was Zebedee supposed to manage without the assistance and support of his sons? Not much fun in that, as meanwhile, the hired men stared slack-jawed at this family drama unfolding right before their eyes.

Apparently, family life and parenthood were no easier 2,000 years ago than they are today. In places like small New England towns, commercial fishing still is—as it was back then—a family business, in which each member of the household has an important role. Fishing for a living, now or in Jesus’ time, is a lot of hard work, and not always fun. Maybe that’s why TV shows about the ordeals of commercial fishermen—with titles such as “Deadliest Catch,” “Monster Fish,” and “Wicked Tuna”—have become unexpected hits.

While a family-run fishing business might not have been the most glamorous profession in ancient Israel, nor have gotten one into the highest levels of Hebrew society, nevertheless it was a respected business and a solid means of income and support for one’s family. In fact, according to some scholars and experts, fishing was more highly regarded than the work of a lowly village carpenter and construction worker such as Jesus’ adoptive father, Joseph was.

So, to spontaneously get up and follow Jesus—as admirable as that may seem from our advantaged perspective 2,000 years later—also meant that James and John, Peter and Andrew, gave up a not-insignificant trade that helped support their families. This reality implies a troubling conclusion for us: Following Jesus faithfully might well require us to abandon parents or family, leave behind the security and comfort of a good job or career, and make financial, and / or personal, sacrifices.

But “Follow me” is precisely what Jesus, beside the Sea of Galilee says to Zebedee’s boys; to that other pair of fishermen brothers, Peter and Andrew; and to each one of us. Jesus’ call to James and John, Peter and Andrew, was both simple, and complex, for there are few words in all of Christian scripture more demanding than: “Follow Me.” Notice, Jesus gives no explanation for His invitation. Nor does He offer any perks as incentives, or provide His recruits with a clear business plan for His start-up ministry. He makes no promise of success or riches, either. His vision statement—to borrow a term from present-day corporate lingo—is only that His Disciples will “fish for people.” And can there be much future in that? The Disciples must have thought so. Or else, Jesus must have had an irresistible, magnetic charisma.

In our time, what those Disciples did would be as stunning as if, say, one our Pennsylvania State Troopers pulled some bearded guy over on the Schuylkill Expressway to check his registration. After rolling down the window, the man smiles at the officer and says in His warm, baritone voice, “Follow Me.” And the cop instantly leaves his cruiser by the side of the highway, gets into the other car, and, as he's driving away with this stranger to do ministry together, calls his wife and kids on his cell phone to say “Goodbye!”

Mark’s Gospel doesn’t show these fishermen agonizing over their decision to drop everything and follow Our Lord. They didn’t first go home and sleep on it, or discuss it at length with family members, friends, or the village elders. They didn’t first check their bank balance or savings accounts. And if they had approached their local rabbi for advice, they most likely would have been ordered to continue working with their father Zebedee, forthwith.

Still, there is something energizing and exciting about these men's impulsive response, which barely qualifies as a decision. Perhaps, by leaving work and home without a second thought, they comprehended at once the larger human family to which Jesus was calling them. To “fish for people” is, after all, about community—a broader concept of family. And, although not always fun, as the Disciples were later to discover, spreading their nets to catch people for Jesus was most definitely joyful. There is no greater joy than bringing God’s love, truth, and forgiveness to people who are sorely in need of the Good News of the Gospel, and the hope and comfort it brings.

Few of us today would leave our nets, much less our Internet, to follow in the footsteps of James and John, Peter and Andrew—or Jesus Himself. Yet Our Lord’s challenge to the Disciples of so long ago remains a challenge to us still today—just those two words: “Follow me.” The fact that we know from the perspective of our 21st-century faith precisely who Jesus is, seems to make little difference in whether we will respond to His call eagerly.

In some sense, the challenge for us is perhaps even greater than for those impetuous first followers of Christ. Most of us are invited to follow Jesus while being called to remain right where we are—in the family we don’t always get along with; at that job we can’t stand; in a community that’s not thriving economically or socially; at the side of those friends who demand too much of us; or in our parish that is far from perfect, with that all-too-human priest who has disappointed us.

Yet, paradoxically, accepting Jesus’ imperative will always lead us to others, will always have us “fishing for people,” even if we never leave home. Following Jesus means getting outside of ourselves, stepping out of our comfort zones, to reach out to others with Christ’s love, care, and compassion, no matter how uncomfortable that makes us; and, living our faith in such a way that others will want what we have.

What the early Disciples must have known instinctively is what we have been taught and must not forget: That in following Jesus we are called to leave *everything*—that is, not clutch or hang onto our lives, priorities, and possessions—because in doing so, we will gain the Kingdom of Heaven. That is “the good news of the Gospel” which Jesus and His Disciples proclaimed with great joy throughout Galilee—and subsequent followers of Christ spread throughout the world, down into our hearts and lives, as well. Just possibly, even James’ and John’s own parents could eventually find joy in that.¹

I would like to close with a prayer adapted from a well-known one by the 13th-century saint, Richard of Chichester:

*Thanks be to Thee, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits Thou hast given us,
for all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for us.
O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,
may we know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly,
day by day. Amen.*²

¹ Adapt. Frank Hegedus, “Follow Me,” 25 January 2015, [Sermons That Work](http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2015/01/12/3-epiphany-b-2015/) < http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2015/01/12/3-epiphany-b-2015/> 23 January 2015.

² Adapt. “Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester,” [Loyola Press.com](http://www.loyolapress.com/day-by-day-prayer-of-saint-richard-of-chichester.htm) < http://www.loyolapress.com/day-by-day-prayer-of-saint-richard-of-chichester.htm> 24 January 2015.