

## **“Come and Follow Me, and I Will Make You \_\_\_\_\_.”**

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*Texts: Mark 1: 14-20*

Let's start where our scripture starts - on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Our text is set just outside of Capernaum, a coastal village nestled into the base of a lush hillside that meets the Sea of Galilee, which is in fact the largest fresh-water lake in Israel, up its northeast corner. Over the years, I've been extremely fortunate to visit a few times, both the wider Galilee region and Capernaum itself, which is now an archaeological site. Picture going to a state or national park-like setting. You pass through entrance gates, pay a small fee, and resist the requisite gift shop before a maze of well-manicured paths opens into a landscape of excavated ruins dotted with signs and info-graphics. It's a place where pilgrims worldwide can set their eyes and feet on first-century foundations and floors of homes and gathering places. There's the remnant of a synagogue, even a large stone olive press where oil was harvested literally two thousand years ago. Capernaum is where Jesus lived and breathed, walked and slept, began his ministry, prayed and preached, taught and healed. Then, as now, it was a site, too, of religious and geopolitical tension and violent battles over land and natural resources. At the time, the entire area was held under the brutal occupation of the Roman Empire, under Emperor Augustus, then Tiberias, under King Herod, and then his son, Herod Antipas.

When I first visited Capernaum, we had a brilliant guide. One of many things he pointed out was an original first-century stone pillar with an inscription etched in ancient Hebrew. It said: “Zebedee - A Blessing Be Upon His Name.” The pillar marked the spot of his family's home. Our guide confirmed that this wasn't a so-called “traditional site” but a historically accurate reference to the same Zebedee I just read about, the same Zebedee who was the fisherman father of Jesus's very first disciples, James and John, and husband of Salome, who was a witness to Jesus' crucifixion. This is the same Zebedee that surely met and knew Jesus himself and hosted him at his house in that very place! Kinda cool, right? Who knew there was any historical record of Zebedee, yet here was proof that Zebedee wasn't some mere character in a story. Something about the timeless beauty of that lakeside landscape, and the hard-as-stone archaeological evidence gave me a deeper sense of proximity to Jesus than I'd never before had. To Jesus and to Zebedee, too! This is why I find it puzzling that each time I've preached this passage, even since those visits to Capernaum, I've barely registered Zebedee as a figure in Mark's story of Jesus calling the first disciples. In case you missed him too, verse 19: “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.”

When I've preached this passage before, I've never mentioned Zebedee! I think it's because I'm usually so surprised and keyed into the immediacy of James and John's response to Jesus. To my mind, this is one of the most unrelatable, if not unbelievable, passages in the gospels! We're only 15 verses into Mark. Chapter 1. They could and probably should be asking: “Jesus, who now?” Yet the next thing we know, they've immediately dropped their nets to follow him without so much as a question. That's the unbelievable part! They had no idea who he was, where they were going, how they would eat, or who would care for their families. All they knew was that their new job description would involve “fishing for people,” whatever *that* means. What was it about the encounter with this man from Nazareth that could inspire them to make such a radical move? What did Jesus exude that caused them to stop and

change course so dramatically? Could it have been his good looks? In one translation, Jesus says: Come and follow me, and I will teach you to *catch men!*” Hey, why not? Or was it (more likely) something else that motivated them? Mark doesn’t say.

Meanwhile, in the context of all this immediacy, the most overlooked character is most relatable. It’s the guy who stays in the boat! I don’t know how I’ve missed him before. Given Jesus’ radically inclusive vibes, it seems safe to assume that the invitation to come and follow would have been extended to Zebedee too! But for Zebedee, apparently, it’s a hard pass! Jesus says, “come and follow me.” Zebedee’s like: “No thanks! I’m good! I’m gonna hang back – stay right here in my boat. You kids go ahead. Let me know how it goes.” Frankly, his response makes a ton more sense than that of his boys! Honestly, we’d likely be and choose to stay in the same boat with Zebedee! The good news is that we don’t know what happens next for Zebedee. And we don’t understand what comes next for us either! For all we know, maybe Zebedee eventually followed, and perhaps we will too, which leads me to wonder if the real monument to Zebedee is his more gradual response, and the way his memory may be a blessing to us all, is the living question he leaves us to ponder, namely: what would it take to get us out of our proverbial boats?

All of this reminds me of something Bob Dylan once told the audience at a 1980 concert in Syracuse! Between songs, I presume, he said: “Jesus tapped me on the shoulder and said, Bob, why are you resisting me? I said I’m not resisting you! He said, You gonna follow me? I said I’ve never thought about that before! He said, When you’re not following me, you’re resisting me.” I’m dying to know what song he played next, but my guess is that more than a few of us here today would answer Jesus’ question, “You gonna follow me?” the same way as Dylan did! Same as Zebedee! Rather than ‘call and response,’ as was the case for James and John, it is more like ‘call and resist!’

For those first followers, I’ve often imagined it was their courage or openness to adventure that moved them out of the boat, out of their comfort zones, and out of everything they had previously known! But if we go back to that on-the-ground, first-century context, I’ve come to wonder if it was something else. I wonder if it was a sense of desperation, too, about their lives and livelihoods and the world around them. Remember when I said they were living under the occupation of the Roman Empire? It was in that setting that Jesus came preaching a new kind of power and authority and kin-dom of God! Scholar Ched Myers puts it this way in a fascinating essay that focuses on social, economic, and political forces at play in the Galilee region at the time of Jesus, drilling down especially into exploitative markets of the first-century fishing industry! He writes: “If the nearby village Tiberius (named after the Emperor) was ground zero in Herod’s project of Romanizing the regional economy, then Capernaum up the coast, a village profoundly impacted by such policies, was the logical place to commence building a movement of resistance. Restless peasant fishermen had little to lose and everything to gain by overturning the status quo. Thus, Jesus’ strategic decision was not unlike Gandhi’s attempts to mobilize the “untouchable” classes in India in campaigns such as his famous Salt March or M.L. King’s fateful choice to stand with the sanitation workers of Memphis in 1968.”<sup>1</sup>

Living under the boot of an empire with nothing to lose and everything to gain? Maybe that helps explain the immediacy of their decision to drop everything and join Jesus! Perhaps they were already primed, ready, utterly desperate even for a change such that they immediately welcomed the chance to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2015/01/22/lets-catch-some-big-fish-jesus-call-to-discipleship-in-a-world-of-injustice/>

follow, and to find themselves willingly drafted into a Spirit-inspired, Jesus-led revolution of love and solidarity!

I wonder can we relate a bit more now? Can we let ourselves feel any of this desperation and/or courage rising in our bodies and beings, especially now that we’ve turned the corner into another election year, with a growing awareness of our American empire’s living legacies of exploitation of people and land? Our text seems to ask if Jesus approached us today, what would it take to break us out of our usual daily rhythms and routines and do something radical to follow him? Think about it. Are we letting ourselves feel desperate enough and/or courageous enough to make some immediate and radical moves that would relinquish our comfort, power, and resources?

Let’s be honest. Many of us come to church for the incredible music, especially here, or for the quiet time during the week. Maybe, hopefully, we come for a little intellectual stimulation or inspiration to be a better person. But how many of us could say so directly: “I come to church to follow Jesus.” No doubt in this congregation, there are some, many even, who could, would, and do say that, who have a deep sense of what it means to practice the discipleship of Christ. For others, though, if we think about that question, “You gonna follow me?” we are thinking about it more than answering it; we are resisting it more than following. And why do we resist? We’ve got our reasons! Maybe we are uncomfortable with the notion that following one religious path excludes others. Maybe it’s an ongoing struggle with the church’s own history of oppression and repression. Maybe we resist coming out as true Jesus followers because we are afraid that people might think we are one of “those” Christians. Yet I wonder if all this resistance *to* Jesus is a cover for our fears of being *in resistance with Jesus*? Could it be that the real reason why we resist Jesus’ call is because we are afraid of what we might lose, of the sacrifices we would have to make to join a truer resistance? And was this what held Zebedee back, at least for a time? Again, the good news is that this his story was still being written in our passage and so is ours!

Looking ahead to Lent, we are making plans now to lean into the theme of courage! “Finding Courage in Community - Lent 2024 at First Church.” You heard it here first! We are eager to find the courage that inspires as we engage a new round of portraits of Americans Who Tell the Truth that will grace our walls in the coming weeks. We hope to find the courage that connects as we offer midweek soup suppers and Deacon-led communion in homes. From our passage, I wonder too if, along with seeking out and finding courage, we need to be leaning into and getting in touch with some of our desperation as well, such that we can use it as a prompt that can help us make bolder moves, that can get us off our boats and butts all the more to resist the rising powers and principalities that are increasingly taking hold of our country and world!

Together, in community, I hope we’ll ask what is the next big step that Jesus calls each of us to take? The “I will make you fishers of men” promise was custom-made for that particular first-century crowd of fishermen. He was speaking their language. But how might he say it to each of us today? But what few words, spoken in your language, might prompt some immediate changes in our lives? *Come and follow me! And I will make you . . . what*

There was a time for me when it was: *Come and follow me, and I will make you stepfather of two very young children! Gulp!*

There’s a tender time for others, even now, when it’s: *Come and follow me, and I will show you love and make you a caregiver of a sick or dying loved one!*

There’s a time for those already stretched to the bone when it might be: *Come and follow me, and I will give you rest!*

Still, for others, if not for all of us, maybe it’s something more demanding:

*Come and follow me, and I will make you a key leader in the Friday Cafe, in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, or our First Church Welcome Corps team. Blessedly, some of you have already heard this call and responded accordingly!*

Maybe in the coming months it will be:

*Come and follow me, and I will send you door knocking in swing states across the country to save our democracy!*

*Come and follow me, and I will send you to march on Washington until the US demands a ceasefire in Israel and Palestine.*

*Come and follow me, and I will make you part of a growing movement for reparations!*

*Come and follow me, and I will make you poor yet richer than you’ve ever been!*

*Come and follow me, and I will make you all the more part of a faith community of resistance and resilience that will fill your life with meaning, challenge, and blessing, come what may!*

What is that custom-made come-and-follow-me invitation that will move us out of our boats of status quo comfort and resignation? More deeply, what is that deep truth of your desperation *and* courage that’s waiting to be touched, just waiting to be hooked, that would make you get up and go right now on a new journey with God to places unknown?

Even now, Jesus is calling us from the shoreline: Come and follow me! If you trust me, I will make you exactly what you need to be to transform your life and the world, that God’s Kin-dom may come and God’s will be done. Amen!