

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.

Pray: O wondrous God of grace and purpose and glory, O God who calls us out, who invites, who touches our hearts wherever we are upon life’s journey. O God who sustains us upon the path—you are everything to us. Help us to hear Your Word this day—to hear it, to receive it, to live it. Let your Holy Spirit convict our hearts once again, our only Sovereign, our only Lord, that we may embark upon the way of Christ, walking in the steps of our Lord. Amen.

As you might imagine, Ben loves to play outside, especially at the playground outside church. We are so blessed to have that play equipment so close to our home, which in the creative imagination of a 3 year old becomes a wondrous sea of possibilities, from the bus we take to go trick-or-treating, visiting Miss Kim and Miss Rose Lee, to a ship on the raging waters, where we have to be careful not to fall overboard, to an airplane flown to distant parts of the country, like to Aunt Elizabeth’s in Iowa or her boyfriend Dan Whiteside in Denver. <squawk> Flight 437 to tower, Flight 437 to tower, “Are we cleared for take off? Over.”

Ben climbs and slides and jumps and plays, stopping ever so often to remove the rocks from his shoes. The gopher holes also provide immense joy, for little boys love to play in the dirt. And then, of course, you have the swings, and there is something very relaxing, very comforting, very peaceful about pushing my own son in the swing. Of course, I also have to push Peanut and Muffin, Ben’s two imaginary cats, in the swing too.

One game we love to play is follow the leader, although truth be told, Ben likes to lead a lot more than he likes to follow. And his wandering path takes us all over that playground. He climbs the steps, even that curvy ladder-thing at times—we have to be careful there. He goes down the slide; he walks across the bridge, he meanders his way around and between and under. We go round and round the poles, even scrunch down to go under the bridge. It gets pretty tight for me down there; I have to get on my knees. And sometimes we walk on the boards on the edge, like we’re walking on a balance beam, precariously balancing ourselves lest we fall into the deep.

This morning, we get our own version of Follow the Leader, with Jesus arriving on the beach with an incredible invitation for four fishermen to become fishers of men. And they go, just like that, leaving their nets behind, even their old man in the boat.

Mark comes at us so fast, from baptism to temptation in the wilderness to the announcement of the beginning of his ministry. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” To the calling of the first four disciples. “Follow me.” And we’re not even halfway through the first chapter yet! Mark gets down to business; there is an urgency to his Gospel, as the gospel writer moves us along with the message of God’s love.

I don’t know about you, but when I hear these passages about the first disciples literally dropping everything, shucking it all to follow Christ, I’m amazed. I find myself dwelling on their sacrifice, their willingness to follow, their great faith in this guy who just shows up on the beach. I mean, had they seen Jesus before, witnessed some miracle or healing, heard him speak in the synagogue? What compelled them to just drop it all and follow Jesus? And all along I think to myself, what were they—crazy?!? I doubt if I could be so brave, so trusting, so faithful. I think about poor Zebedee, waiting for him to call out, “James, John? Where are you going? We’ve got work to do! Come back here! Wait till your mother hears about this!”

But I fear if we concentrate too much on the disciples we miss the beauty, the power of this passage. Instead of looking at the disciples and their actions of faith, although we’ll get to that, consider the movement of God and Jesus’ ability to give faith even where there was none before. You see, then it gets much more interesting, for this passage reminds us that our God can sow the seeds of faith into even the most barren of hearts, even in the most rocky ground. Jesus is such a powerful embodiment of God’s love and grace and sustaining presence that He literally transforms those four early disciples’ hearts on the spot. “Follow me.” “Yes, Lord. Yes Lord! We will follow, we will follow.”

The emphasis at first should not be on the disciples but on the power of Jesus Christ, the power to give faith, to grant trust, to be so overwhelming in love and grace and glory that you can’t help but be moved to believe. That’s nothing more than God’s amazing, redeeming love at work. You might question the disciple’s ability to start upon that journey so easily; you probably have doubts about your own willingness to surrender, to trust, to step out in faith, to walk in the steps of the Lord, but never, never my friends, never doubt in the power of God to move in your life—to bring forgiveness and healing and mercy, to help you let go of bitterness or worry or fear, to soothe your guilty conscience, to comfort your wailing soul, to guide your wandering spirit back home, to make you right again, whole again, alive again. God can do it. I say it again, our Lord can do it. Glory be to God, Jesus can do it.

A week or so ago, I talked to the Women’s Fellowship about holiness and the way God walks with us on the journey of faith that we might become disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we talked a bit about the way John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, explained the path of faith towards holiness and how God works in our lives along the way, which he described in three movements of grace: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace.

To help us better understand, he used the image of a house, our spiritual home if you will, the place God longs for us to get to, to reside in, where we truly know the Lord and the eternal life found in our savior.

First is the image of the front porch. We know that God loves everyone. Our Lord is so full of love, so full of grace, so full of mercy that Jesus literally overwhelms us with that

unconditional, transforming, redeeming love, a love that is given freely, with absolutely no strings attached, given to all, sinner and saint alike. You see, in the village of this world and in this illustration, every one of us walks by that house. Many never go in; they just walk on by, but God is always, always on the front porch—inviting us, welcoming us, loving us. God puts people in our lives: guides, shepherds, folks that remind us of God’s love. Experiences too, both the good and the bad. God uses it all, speaks to us in so many ways, even when we’re not listening, even before we realize we need salvation. Cause God wants to be close to us. Our Lord does not wish the death of sinners but that we all be saved, that we all find life! God pours out this love on everyone, all people. Wesley calls this prevenient grace, grace that is always there. God is always welcoming, loving us even when we don’t know Him.

It is this kind of grace, prevenient grace, that is embodied in Jesus on that beach and on all the front porches of our lives. God loves us. God loves us! God loves us.

This brings us to the next step—the doorway. Thankfully, again, it is God who helps us make it to that door. Feeling the love, the grace, the stirring of the Holy Spirit, the promise of new life, the assurance of a presence that will never let you down, a friend that will walk always beside you, God reaches down with an invitation to walk through the door and to be born again—to repent and receive God’s forgiveness, making us right with God. God is always there. The door is always there, but we have to open that door. Wesley calls this justifying grace, for it makes us right with God, forgiving our sin and saving us. We see that in the movement of those disciples. They get out of the boat and they follow, just like that. But again, don’t put the emphasis on the disciples, put it on the Lord. This is grace, after all, and God is the one who is doing the work. Yes, you have to step through the doorway, but God takes care of all the hard part. He’s the one who actually forgives your sins, you just have to want it. And even then, God can send us such experiences, such amazing, powerful encounters with the divine that we can’t help but be moved with awe and wonder ... and faith. And let me tell you, once you step through that door your life is never quite the same.

Unfortunately, many never get out of that doorway. That’s where they stop, thinking that’s enough, that’s all that is required, that’s all there is, that somehow they’ve reached the summit when in fact they’re just starting on the journey. Accepting Jesus as your savior is the beginning of faith, not the end of it, the beginning.

And so many Christians seem to plateau. They get in certain habits, routines, thinking they are “doing enough” in the faith of Jesus Christ. But God is always there, inviting us to go deeper, to come into the house of the Lord, to find out the power, the purpose, the grace of living a life of discipleship.

The final movement is called sanctifying grace, and this is the step that takes you through the threshold and into the house, into the realm of God to dwell with the most high, to have that personal relationship, to let yourself be molded and shaped and nurtured—to be made holy. If we move into this house, letting Jesus Christ come into all the rooms of our home, we gradually allow the Holy Spirit to shape and mold us into a better servant of God. The Lord can clean up our houses, gradually change our outlook, our passions, our behavior, fixing the broken pieces, cleaning up the mess, bringing restoration and wholeness. It doesn’t happen overnight; it’s always a process, but this is the movement of grace in our lives that truly opens our eyes to the love of God, as we realize His abiding presence and come to love him and thus our neighbor more fully and completely.

This is what it means to walk in the steps of the Lord, to follow him, to literally become like Christ. That's not easy, but that is the movement of sanctifying grace, the grace that makes you holy. And though this movement of grace invites us into greater service, greater commitment, greater faithfulness, it is still grace, for we cannot do it alone. Only through surrender, through a yielding of the Spirit, of letting Jesus walk in all parts of our house, of letting God be the potter can we ever experience the power of really knowing our Lord. For it is God who gives us the faith to trust him, and that, my friends, is always grace.

Follow the leader. I think often times we're like Ben, we like to lead a lot more than we likes to follow. That's human nature, cause it's hard for us to trust in God at times, to have the kind of faith that sets you free, to step out upon the path, getting out of that boat and following Jesus, to even throw yourself into the arms of God, knowing that He will catch you.

But through the steps, and even the curvy ladder-things of our lives: the struggles, the mountain top experiences, the hard work, we shall go, meandering our way through our lives, across the bridges that take us from one part of our journey to the next. At times there is the joy and fun of going down that slide, as exhilarating as that can be, and also the hard walk upon the narrow way as we sometimes have to balance ourselves precariously through temptation and adversity. Yes, sometimes we fall or misstep, but God is always there to help us up, to take the rocks out of our shoes, even to hold us when we fall and hurt ourselves and cry. And even when it gets tight, even when you have to crawl on your knees, there Jesus is to lead you. Walk in the steps of the Lord, my friends. Work at it, keep pushing yourself to go deeper, developing your faith and a life of discipleship, trusting that God is always there. For the grace of God will help you to walk in the steps of the Lord. Amen.