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“Claimed and Called: Fishers”Rev. Jennie SankeyMark 1:14-20January 24, 2021 |

If there is such a thing as a formula for the Christian life, a secret recipe for “how to make a disciple,” it’s got to be what we find in this story today.

Jesus comes to Galilee proclaiming the good news, the formula for “how to be a disciple”: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” Repent and believe in the good news.

That’s it. Step 1: Repent. Step 2: Believe in the good news. Got it?

This phrase, “the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe,” is at the core of Mark’s Gospel. Unfortunately, the message “repent and believe” carries a lot of baggage for a lot of people. It gets used most often in terms of individual confession-YOU have to repent and get YOUR relationship right with God. YOU have to stop being so bad and start being good. I don’t think that’s the intent of this message of Jesus at all. In fact, I think this phrase, “repent and believe” has so much baggage, that I prefer an entirely different translation, from the Common English Bible: “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

Repent. Believe in the good news. Change your hearts, trusting in what Jesus is telling us. That God is doing something new. Now!

This formula for discipleship still doesn’t feel like it’s completely straightforward. Like on a technical challenge on the Great British Bake-Off that just says to add flour but doesn’t say how much. Or when you’re making enchiladas with Moira and David Rose, and the recipe calls to “fold in the cheese.” What is it that Jesus is asking me to repent from? What exactly does it mean to believe that God’s kingdom is near? For four fishermen on the Lake of Galilee, it looks like this:

Jesus passes by Simon and Andrew, interrupting them mid net cast, calling them to become fishers of people. “Immediately, they left their nets and followed him.”

A little farther down, he approaches James and John, and “they left…and followed him.”

One by one, Simon, Andrew, James and John embody Jesus’ message. When God comes near to them, they repent and believe. They change their lives, leaving their profession as fishermen. They leave their own families, who may have been fishing the waters of Galilee for generations. They leave their nets. They repent, change, and trust the good news of Jesus, following. Immediately. Urgently. *Now!* And just like that, they are no longer fishing for fish, they are fishing for people.

I’ll admit, I don’t always find this urgency in my life as a follower of Jesus. My understanding of God’s call for me is more of a slow burn, one that led me to find this vocation through the voices of many over a number of years. I made some distinct choices along the way, but I didn’t have to make a big change to get here, because I feel that God has been near in each step. But is it possible I’ve been dragging my feet a bit? Or a lot? Have I truly changed my heart and life, trusting in the good news? Have I failed at this core calling of Christ, to fish for people?

New Testament scholar Ted Smith suggests that a better, more literal translation of “I will make you fish for people,” is “I will make you to become fishers for people.” Hear the difference there? Jesus is not giving the disciples a new task. He is giving them an entirely new way of life, that is going to take some becoming. “I will make you to become fishers for people.” It is something they have started right away, by responding to Jesus’ sermon to “Repent and believe the good news,” and something that they will learn as they follow and “become” a new kind of fisher.

Jesus brought this message to Simon, Andrew, James and John in a very particular fashion, using words and a metaphor they could deeply identify with. I won’t pretend to know enough about fishing in the first century (or in the 21st century) to fully understand how the disciples heard this call to “become fishers for people.” I think I can count on my hands how many times I’ve been fishing, and I think for the majority of those experiences, I was under the age of 12. I can’t tell you much about bait, or what the best fishing pole is. I can’t tell you about how to know when to go out on the water, or where in the water the conditions are best for a good catch. These four disciples knew the ins and outs of fishing on the Lake of Galilee as well as Erik Mjurod knows the moving business, or Dana Rogers knows how to grow a juicy tomato. The disciples knew fishing like an experienced nurse knows how to stick an IV line or a parent knows the difference between a cry of boredom and a cry of pain.

So maybe I don’t need to become a fisher of people. Or even worry too much about the intricacies of what fishing in the 1st century looked like to understand this metaphor for discipleship, because God calls me in a particular way with a metaphor that will ring true. Christian author Debbie Thomas, in an essay on this story from Mark writes, “when Jesus calls these tried-and-true fishermen to follow him, they understand the call not as a directive to abandon their intelligence, intuition, and experience, but to bring the best of those gifts forward for the sake of a more beautiful and peaceable world — a world where all are nourished.  The call is to become even more fully and freely themselves for the sake of God’s kingdom.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The secret recipe for discipleship doesn’t just have three simple steps. The foundation is this: “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” But the way it looks it your life is probably not going to involve fish.

The reign of God has come near. Repent and believe. Change your heart and lives and trust. We don’t need to become fishers to become disciples. But we do have to be ready to recognize what God is calling us to repent from and believe in within our particular lives.

We aren’t called to be fishers. But maybe Jesus is calling you, Erik Mjurod, professional moving expert, to become movers and packers of people, gently but with strength and strategy lifting and carrying them in the great transitions of life. And maybe Jesus is calling you, Dana Rogers, vegetable garden expert, to “become a gardener of people” cultivating spaces of nurture and growth in the lives of others. And maybe Jesus is calling you, nurses and doctors to become “healers of people,” using the skills you have learned in the healthcare field to tend to the physical needs of sick and injured people. And maybe Jesus is calling you, parents of young or not so young children who have delighted in this vocation, to “become parents of people,” caring, guiding, modeling, and providing for the nurture of others. And certainly, Jesus is calling urgently to us, church, to become a body of people that unites these particular gifts as together we repent and believe in the good news.

Jesus never calls one person to go it alone-he preaches to crowds, ministers with a group of friends, and calls people to join this movement. When Jesus calls the disciples, he does not call them to change their hearts and lives and continue to live in their regular sphere of being. Jesus’ call isn’t just a call to smile and be nice to all you meet, hoping that the love of Jesus will passively seep its way out into the world through your good deeds. Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John to change their hearts and lives and join a new community that will live that change out with them. Which is what we’re trying to do here. Right, church? And if there ever was a year where we’ve been asked to change our hearts and lives, to repent and believe, this is it! With an urgency born of necessity, we have been called to change.

Jesus’ call to become fishers or gardeners or pastors or healers or parents of people is both a statement and invitation to trust in a future with God that demands that we change on an individual and communal level. Things *cannot* stay the same when God comes near.

Answering the call to “repent and believe” looks this: a group of fishermen who up and left their jobs to follow a man with a compelling message.

Answering the call to “repent and believe” looks like this: A teacher finishing the 2020 spring semester scrambling to teach virtually for the first time in their life, and then choosing to return to their job in the fall, to show up for young learners online and in-person, cultivating skills and facing challenges they never expected in their profession. And then choosing to show up again after Christmas break.

Answering the call to “repent and believe” looks like this: A pastor living in California showing up in Duluth, Georgia during a pandemic to spend most of her days on zoom. Only a call from God alone could lead a person to change her life in such a way. And if a response to trust in God’s good news doesn’t look like a tech-savvy, energetic, creative leader showing up just when Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church needed her in 2020, I don’t know what good news looks like.

Answering the call to “Repent and Believe” looks like this: “We’ll be back by Easter” turned into “maybe we’ll be back by Christmas,” turned into drive-in/streaming church. If you’re worshiping with us today, you are answering a particular call to show up in this community. You have done some repentance - you have changed your heart and your worshiping life, and trusted God will show up out here in the parking lot/on the internet, because you want to join in on the good news.

I heard a call this week to repent and believe at the presidential inauguration from inaugural poet Amanda Gorman, through a recitation of her original poem “The Hills We Climb.” She ended it with, “***When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid.***The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light. If only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

Jesus has already told us, the time is fulfilled. God has drawn near. The light has come.

We are called to see it, hear it, respond to it, and become it with all that God has created us to be. Repent. Believe in the good news. Now is the time!

1. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)