

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

Psalms 62:5-12, Mark 1:14-20

January 24, 2021

BELONGINGS

One month ago today was Christmas Eve, a time of celebration of the incarnation, God's coming to humanity in such a full way, that God became human in order to do so. God came and met us where we were, as we were. Jesus, as God in the flesh, went to where people were, but loved them enough to not leave them where he found them. We heard in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark how Jesus went to fisherfolk where they were working along the Galilean shore, and he invited them to follow him.

The described responses to Jesus' invitation includes them leaving behind some belongings. The first account is about a set of brothers, Simon and Andrew, who Jesus sees as they are casting a net. Jesus invites them, "Follow me and I will make you become those who fish for people." We don't know if fishing had been good or bad that day. We don't know if one of the brothers had a sore back and was interested in pursuing something different. The Gospel of John's account indicates that Andrew had been a disciple of John the Baptist, so perhaps this was not the first time they had encountered Jesus. Nevertheless, their response is described as immediately leaving behind a particular belonging: their fishing nets so they could follow Jesus.

We find out later in the chapter that Simon is married. I wonder what his wife thought about her husband leaving his nets behind to follow some itinerant rabbi all around. Now, to be fair, Simon and Andrew probably did not initially know how long they would be away from their nets. Jesus did not say at that point, "Follow me for the next three years." As it would turn out though, it was a calling that would be lived out day by day, not just for three years, but for the rest of their lives. Not everyone who is called to follow Jesus today is called to leave behind his or her vocation and the items associated with it. Being able to have the income to keep body and soul together is important, but we learn from Jesus' call to follow that more than bodily needs and physical possessions are important. Many do find that Jesus' call does lead them to reconsider how they are using their skills and energies in their life. They find what feeds their souls and not just their bodies.

Next Jesus sees another set of brothers, James and John, who were with their father, Zebedee, along with some hired hands sitting in their fishing boat, mending their nets. He invites them to follow him as well. The Gospel of Luke tells us they had been fishing partners with Simon. Perhaps Simon's response to Jesus influenced theirs. We are not told whether they got along well with their father and their co-workers or not. Regardless, they all had belonged to one another as family and business, and that sense of belonging, as it had been, gets left behind. In what was a patriarchal society, such a move would certainly be frowned upon. One of the ten commandments required honoring one's father and mother. Jesus did not undermine this commandment. He simply demonstrated that there is a higher loyalty called for than to any particular human relationship. James and John belonged to God even more than they belonged to Zebedee. To live out one's devotion to God can require an evaluation of one's relationship to certain things and even certain people in order to cling to the way God shows us.

Earlier in our reading, we heard what Mark presented as Jesus' first words in this gospel account. Soon after Jesus had gotten the bad news of John the Baptist's arrest, he proclaims a message about repenting and believing the good news. It would not be long before John, who had baptized him, would be executed. But Jesus sees it as a needed time for sharing God's good news, which is what the word 'gospel' means. So he invites the two sets of brothers to leave their productive efforts to provide for their families in order to follow him. In essence, Jesus indicates that there is something even more central to our lives than how we make a living; something even more urgent than what we might eat for our next meal. Jesus says, "Come, follow me, even when bad news is lurking so you can experience God's reign and God's good news for you and all people."

He doesn't say I'll lead you wherever you want to go. He doesn't say they are invited as tourists who are just accompanying him as a guide and then at the end of a brief trip everyone will say, "Goodbye." He doesn't say come and I will show you a good time; I'll give you free tickets to the local chariot races or a free meal or a free lottery ticket if you come with me. Rather Jesus summons them, and there is something about his invitation that compels them to leave the security they had known to step toward a new belonging relationship with God and one another.

With Jesus, they could explore not just the Palestinian terrain around Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, but they could delve into the spiritual terrain of a deeper kind of living. They likely had been told about God throughout their lives, but this would be an opportunity to encounter God and to learn more about themselves as well. This Jesus not only seemed to know what he was talking about; he knew whom he was talking about.

They did not know ahead of time where Jesus would lead them. Neither do we. Margaret became a Presbyterian minister within the Presbytery of Philadelphia, and began her service as a Navy chaplain. This call led her to a variety of locations of service in following the call of Jesus Christ. She eventually became the chief of chaplains of the U.S. Navy. Earlier this month, Margaret Grun Kibben began service as the chaplain of the United States House of Representatives. She is the first woman to have held those two positions. ¹ She preached yesterday to our Zoom presbytery meeting as one who could not have envisioned where Christ's call would lead her.

Another story – Jill went through confirmation classes and became a confirmed member on the day she was baptized here at Abington Presbyterian Church on April 6, 1966. ² She pursued higher education and became an educator. She married a young U.S. Senator, a widower, who eventually got elected as Vice President and then President of the United States. Jill Jacobs Biden, when she was baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ, a daughter of this congregation, could not have envisioned that she would become the First Lady of the United States.

Whether we are led to serve in a place of high honor or not, it might be frightening to think about just where our Lord will lead us as we follow. But our psalm for the day reminds us that not only do you and I belong to God, power and steadfast love also belong to God. So even when there is plenty of bad news around us, Jesus helps us know there is even more powerful good news that God's love is to be experienced and shared in ways that leads us to new destinations. What we would leave behind in following Jesus wouldn't necessarily be fishing nets or a parent, but hopefully would be our misguided priorities and selfish goals. We would be called to leave behind hatred, bitterness, indifference and the worship of things. Jesus comes to where we are and invites you and me to follow. It is good news that Jesus

meets us where we are and loves us enough not to leave us there. As we follow and find out what it means to belong to him, then we will see just how good that news really is. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ <https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/123120>

² From Abington Presbyterian Church records