

Sermon Preached at Christ Church Georgetown, Epiphany 3, Year B (1.24.21)

Texts: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; **Mark 1:14-20**; Psalm 62:6-14

Focus Statement: Discipleship moves us into a deeper relationship with the world, not away from the world.

*“And **immediately** he called them...”*

Back when we could get out and about more freely, I used to go to Old Town Alexandria a bunch. Maybe once a week just to escape the seminary. Usually I’d go read in a coffee shop, but sometimes I’d go down to the waterfront. Driving in, I’d see this same woman from time to time, and she was always going on a run. But what puzzled me was that while she was running, she was also *always smoking*—like, cigarette-in-hand. And it made me laugh every time! Because the thought process had to have gone one of two ways. In the first, maybe she knew smoking affected her lungs, so to counteract it, she’d run. “If I’m going to smoke, I need to run. Call it even.” Or, there’s the second thought process, “If I’m going to run, I need a cigarette.”

It was always so curious and so funny, and it reminds me a lot of a story that Pope Francis tells in the movie *The Two Popes* (a movie about the transition of papacy from Pope Benedict to Pope Francis). The story goes more or less like this:

There were two seminarians, who had a bit of a vice. They liked to smoke during their prayers together. The first seminarian, feeling a bit unsure of his vice, goes to his spiritual director and asks, “Father, is it permitted to smoke while praying?” The clergyman was aghast. “No! No, of course not! Of course you shouldn’t smoke while you pray!”

So, he goes back to his friend and tells him the news. “We have to quit smoking while we pray.” But the second seminarian insists, “No, no. You’re just asking the wrong question...”

So, the first guy goes back to his spiritual director and asks, “Now Father, is it *prohibited* to *pray* while smoking?”

This is, of course, a very different question! Is it good to *smoke* while *running*? Probably not. Is it good to *run* while smoking? Now this is a very intriguing question!

Now, I bring these stories up not as encouragement to take up cigarettes, but because there's a *simultaneity* in both of them. And a levity. The second story in particular articulates an understanding of faith in which our lives as people, bodies *in* the world, are not in competition with the demands that God puts before me. We don't *leave the world* in order to follow God, we only, as one writer puts, "live the *same world* differently."¹

And this is what I want us to think about today, how to live that same world differently: Discipleship, I think, asks us to do both things at once: to remain in the world, *and* to follow God.

Over the last few weeks, we've heard a few different sermons floating around this theme. On the second Sunday after Christmas, we set up the conversation to talk about two yesses. God's yes to us, and our yes to God. On the First Sunday of Epiphany, Melissa preached about holiness. Holiness, she said, means a dive *into* the river, for all its currents and boulders, all the ways it knocks us around and scrapes us up.

And today, we read in Mark that "*immediately* he called them." There's a certain simultaneity at play *here too* among the disciples, where Christ's call brings them into a *deeper relationship with the world*. And this is a point we often miss in this passage from Mark. True, they left their nets to follow him, but they left their nets to follow him *into* a suffering, struggling world, to become "fishers of *people* (ἄνθρωπων)," not to quit fishing all together.

And this is what I mean by a *deeper* relationship to the world. Leaving the boat, we don't find out talents useless, we find them *even more necessary* as the call of discipleship opens our gifts out to the world. Stepping out of the boat, discipleship transforms our relationships such that we would find ourselves moving toward the world in compassion, not fleeing from it. We are to do both at once: live in the world, *and* be disciples. And the difference is a matter of direction. Having been called, we find that our orientation shifts. Where once we were merely *in* the world, now we find that we live also *toward* the world.

¹ Emmanuel Falque, *Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 102-111.

Likewise, in being thrown deeper into the world, we find that discipleship is always a question of the present, that is, a question *the time we are in*.

There's a painting I think of sometimes when I hear the story of the disciples being called out of the boat. It's by a Swiss painter from the 1400's and was commissioned for an altarpiece. It depicts the disciples' first encounter with Jesus. They're frantically trying to haul in, recast the net, and Jesus stands calmly on the shore in this intensely red robe. One fisherman is in the water, bewildered. It's a painting that tries to depict the movement from chaos to peace, that is the times before and after we know God.

But what always strikes me about the painting now is its landscape, and its *timeliness*.² Instead of imagining Israel, the scene is painted on *the lake of Geneva*. To the painter, the piece probably looked very modern. It's decidedly a Swiss landscape, the folks are dressed in the cloaks and stockings of the late medieval period, early renaissance (bowl cuts, pointed brown boots), as if to reframe the question of memorial. Meaning, the artist here, rather than asking what it would have looked like for the disciples to be called in *their* time, asks a better question. What would it look like if the disciples were called in *our* time? At a literal level, what *would* it look like? It would be as if someone depicted this scene taking place right down on the waterfront, or the Wharf.

In this sense, the painting articulates well our intention here. Discipleship, always a task for our *present*, is *worldly* in the sense that it happens always wherever *we are*. Lake Geneva, the Potomac. And we can ask what would it have been like to be a disciple *then* (in the time of the disciples), but in the words of the second seminarian, we're asking the wrong question. Instead, we ought to ask, what does it look like for me to be *immediately* called now, (always) today? How can I live *this* same world *differently*? How can I take on Christ in my person? How can I trade one sort of fishing for another?

² Owing this reading to E.H. Gombrich. See, E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 16th Ed. (London: Phaidon, 2015), 245: "Witz desired to bring home to the burghers of Geneva what it must have looked like when Christ stood by the waters. Thus he painted not just any lake but a lake they all knew, the lake of Geneva with the broad ridge of Mont Salève in the background."

My friends, discipleship and human life are not in competition, but *necessary partners*. God is not known despite our life in the world, but *because of it*. Which is to say, “We have no other experience of God but human experience.”³ Because of this, we have no other means of discipleship than *this human life*, which can be leveraged toward the world. Things like the upcoming Food Drive and the Wednesday Soup Kitchen help us along the way, but there may be other things near to us that ask for our attention: our family, our parish, our neighbors, a stranger in our midst or someone we’ve known for a while who just hasn’t been themselves lately. Discipleship calls us toward all these things and more. It is a means of discerning among us, “Who needs help?” “Who needs someone to move toward them?”

And to say that we’re not *prohibited* from praying while smoking means that the call of discipleship can work its way into every single opening of our lives (even perhaps our vices) such that we do not need to choose between being in the world and following God. Instead, by following God, we will be led into the world over and over again, both to find God and to find our neighbor. “And immediately he called them...”

Amen.

³ Falque, *Metamorphosis*, 17.