

3rd Sunday in Epiphany

January 21-22, 2012

Mark 1:14-20

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Caught Off Guard

In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus doesn't explain, persuade, or convince. He declares. The brevity of his remarks underscores the urgency of "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus commands and what happens is good news.

This is what Mark is telling us in the call of the disciples: Jesus calls and the disciples follow. It is as much a miracle as casting out the demon in the synagogue or healing the leper, two episodes that follow this call.

No one seemed able to turn Louis Zamperini's life around. As a boy he stole from stores or neighbors; as a youth he was continually in fights. When he was 15 he decided to take off on his own; ride the trains; go somewhere. His mother gave him a sandwich, his father \$2 – a lot of money in 1932 – but Louie found a friend and they hitchhiked to LA, broke into a car and slept on the seats. The trip was a nightmare. They would up sitting on the ground in a rail yard, filthy, bruised, sunburned, and wet, sharing a stolen can of beans.

Then a train rattled past. Louie looked up. "I saw...beautiful white tablecloths and crystal on the tables, and food, people laughing and enjoying themselves and eating," he said later. "And (I was) sitting here shivering, eating a miserable can of beans.

He remembered the money in his father's hand, the fear in his mother's eyes as she offered him a sandwich to take with him. He stood up and headed home.¹

From that unexpected vision of a different life, Louie came home a different young man. He was done with stealing and fighting; now he would work.

Simon and Andrew, James and John are caught off guard by God's Word speaking to them on an ordinary day while they're at work. As Barbara Taylor Brown has said, "this is the power of God creating faith where there was no faith and discipleship where there was none a moment before."²

There was no preparation for them to leave their families and their businesses behind to travel with Jesus. No interview, no test, no paperwork. Jesus calls and the four men "immediately" drop everything to go with him.

Dorothy Loots recently lent me a book about the establishment of American colonies of German Lutherans from Neuendettelsau starting in 1840's. Over and over again, the author told the stories of Franconians who immigrated in small groups to begin clearing ground for farming in the wilderness territory of America to establish mission outposts for the church. The call for missionaries went out, and these people sailed away from home and family to new lands.

God commands and what happens is good news.

¹ Laura Hilibrand, *Unbroken*, p.26-28.

² Barbara Taylor Brown, "Miracle on the Beach," *Home by Another Way*, Crowley Publications, 1997.

In a culture that emphasizes our choices and our independence, this makes for an uncomfortable reading. We pride ourselves on our ability to shape our lives and determine our own destinies. A mantra for our youth is “you can make any dream come true.”

We would be happier to focus on the disciples. What did they think? What made them able to do this? How had they been prepared ahead of time to go with Jesus when he happened by? Just tell us what we have to do and we’ll try to fit it into our busy schedules.

But the Holy Spirit has inspired a different tale than the one we might twist to our comfort. This is the power and the love of God – “to recruit people who have made terrible choices; to invade the most hapless lives and fill them with light; to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and smack them upside the head with glory.”³

This is the power of God, to create in Layla Engelbrecht a saving faith and to fill her life with the Spirit of Christ, although she has not been consulted for her opinion in this matter at all.

Whether we're ready or not, God acts.

We are caught off guard by the Spirit, and confess it is “most certainly true” that

“I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”⁴

There’s the miracle in your life. God has called you to be a disciple and you have been given faith and enlightenment to follow Jesus’ ways. God speaks, and good news happens, even it catches us off guard.

Amen.

³ Taylor, op.cit.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, “Explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed.”