

“The Call”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
January 22, 2017

Matthew 4: 12-23

Let me take a quick survey here: how many of you put away your Christmas decorations on the day after Christmas? How many of you put them away on January 1? How many of you still haven't put them away?

Don't be ashamed! After we put away the decorations here at church on January 7, I thought, “Now we need to do this at our house.” But it was only this past week that the last of our decorations got taken down and put back into storage. Maybe it was subliminally not wanting to acknowledge that the holidays were over. Maybe it was just a lack of motivation to finish that task amid all the other tasks of life. I don't know – but we finally put all our Christmas stuff away for another year.

The decorations are put away. The poinsettias are gone. The sanctuary is “back to normal.” We are several weeks away from the beginning of Lent, and a few months away from Easter Sunday. In the liturgical calendar, the church calls this period “ordinary time.” The simplest way to know it is ordinary time is that the green cloths are back on the table and pulpit!

David Toole writes: *Ordinary time is “ordinary” in part because of what it is not: it is not Advent or Christmas or Lent or Easter. It is not, therefore, the time during which the church is engaged in preparation for, or celebrations of, the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Ordinary time is also ordinary because of what it is: it is the liturgical season that makes up most of our time – thirty-three or thirty-four weeks of every year, depending on the dates of Epiphany and Easter. It is the time during which we are called, like Peter and Andrew in this passage from Matthew, to follow Jesus, not because of the star that announced his birth, nor, yet, because of the excitement conjured by his promise of a trip to Jerusalem, but simply because he has said, “Follow me”* (David Toole, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 284-286).

Ordinary time. It's the time between extraordinary. It's the time filled with the mundane, with the routine, with the normal. It's the time filled with meetings and deadlines and illness and stress. It's the time filled with life – which perhaps is why we look forward to those extraordinary times like Christmas or Easter, as they perhaps give us a “break” from the ordinary. But it is in this ordinary time that we predominantly live, and out of which we receive the call of God.

The call of Jesus to follow him does not exclusively come in the midst of great celebrations or special seasons of the year. It predominantly comes during the ordinary times, the routines of daily living, the moments that on the surface seem far from transformative. And yet, even in those most ordinary of moments, our Lord calls and says, "Follow me."

Indeed, Jesus issues this first call to his disciples not out of joy and exuberance, but out of weariness and anxiety. He has just come out of his wilderness experience, spending forty days being tempted by the devil. And upon that physical challenge, he then receives news that John the Baptist had been arrested (4:12). John was his brother, the one who baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. Jesus must have been both physically and emotionally drained at that moment, and in fact the word used in our translation is "he withdrew" to Galilee. Who would have blamed him if he wished to withdraw from these difficult circumstances?

But he doesn't - and Matthew reminds us that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's prophecy. The gospel writer quotes the ninth chapter of Isaiah, a scripture that we last read on Christmas Eve. As Isaiah spoke of a people whose lives were illumined by the coming of the Messiah's light, so Jesus goes to the same land in Capernaum and begins to spread that light. And in his interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy, Matthew has in mind two groups who are to hear, see, and be transformed by this light. "The people who walked in darkness" are, for Matthew, the Jewish people who have been waiting for the Messiah. It is to Jews that Jesus primarily came, to redeem them and save them from their oppression. But in the midst of this prophecy is also the phrase "Galilee of the Gentiles." Such a reference foreshadows what Jesus will tell his disciples from a mountain in Galilee, to go and make disciples of all nations - including those who are not Jews. The light of the world is for all people, and that light will call on all to follow him.

After this reflection by Matthew on Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, a sharp turn is made in tone. The message that the light of the world has to share is not complacent and benign. It is a call that interrupts the world, barges in on our routines, and jolts us with its emphasis. Matthew writes, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (4:17). The Messiah's coming is here, the kingdom of God is very close. The light illumines the darkness of our lives, showing us where we need to change and follow a new path.

That abruptness continues when Jesus seeks out his first disciples. As he walked along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon Peter and Andrew casting their nets for fish. Without an introduction, without a greeting, without a "Pardon me, may I ask you something?" - without warning, Jesus issues his call, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for

people” (4:19). And later, in a similar manner, he happened across James and John, and called to them that they might follow him, as well. Just like that, the call has infiltrated people’s lives without warning.

We all have our definitions of discipleship: to accept Jesus’ principles of living, to further the life of the church, and so on. But what Matthew wants his readers to hear is that we are not “to admire him or accept his principles, not even to accept him as our personal Savior, but to follow him” (New Interpreter’s Bible, 170). That is the model of discipleship we are to emulate – to follow the one who speaks God’s Word to us. That is how one becomes a believer, a disciple of Jesus Christ: by the power of Jesus’ word that generates faith in your heart. Once we have heard that word, we are led to respond to the call.

And that is just what Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John do – they follow Jesus without question or objection. They didn’t ask, “Where are we going?” or “How long do I need to ask off from work?” or “How much is this going to cost?” or “How will this affect my schedule?” Without knowing the destination, the end result, the means by which they would get there – without looking ahead – they simply put one foot in front of the other and answered the call. Why? Because in that call, God spoke to them.

Jesus calls us in a similar manner today. He calls us in the midst of our busy, mundane, ordinary lives, saying, “Follow me.” He calls us when we are exuberant and high on life, saying, “Follow me.” He calls us when we are sad, lonely, or despondent, saying, “Follow me.” He calls us when we are confident, and he calls us when we are afraid, saying, “Follow me.” He calls us when we are at peace with our neighbor, and he calls us when we are in conflict with one another, saying, “Follow me.” He calls us when we are faithful, and he calls us when we doubt, saying, “Follow me.” Through these baptismal waters, the Lord is always issuing his call to us – “Follow me.”

The question for us is: how will we answer the Lord’s call? Will we hear it clearly amid all the noise of life, or will it get lost in the chaos of so many voices that we constantly hear? Will we respond to our Savior’s call with love, grace, and hope, or will we minimize our Savior’s call as too hard or too difficult? Will we wait only for the Lord’s call in the mountaintop experiences of life? Or will we believe that Christ’s call comes during all times – even the ordinary moments – and recognize that we are following him every moment of every day we are blessed to be on this earth?

How will you respond to the call of God by the light of the world? Will you hesitate and wait? Or will you drop what you are doing, and immediately see where he takes you?

May God be with each of us as we answer the call of God in our lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen.