



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Mark 1:16-20**  
**January 22, 2012**

This is such a cool, important passage you just heard. It was important in my life, Jesus comes to the sea and says to the disciples *Follow me*. I've told you this story before, my own conversion story. I dreamed this when I was in college. It was just a dream I know. I was a heathen person, but in this dream, Jesus said to me "Follow me." Nothing has really been the same since then.

Reynolds Price tells about a dream that he had. He was diagnosed with a malignant tumor in his spinal cord. So, dealing with this, he had a dream one night. Jesus is by the Sea of Galilee and says "Follow me." Reynolds says "I've got a tumor." Jesus says to him "My child, your sins are forgiven." Reynolds said "That's not exactly what I was worried about." *Follow me*.

One of the things that I love is that a few years ago, archaeologists found a real fishing boat from the first century in the Sea of Galilee.

This is one of those amazing archaeological finds. They found this boat, and it's got to be a boat that Jesus would have seen, perhaps he stepped into this boat – perhaps the boat even belonged to one of the disciples who were fishermen. I mean, you wish on the bow of the ship it said "SS Simon Peter" or some such. What I like about the boat is sometimes we get to thinking that religion is this kind of mystical, invisible thing, like a dream. But here's a real boat, you can touch it, it's made of wood. This story is a real story. It really happened with real people, and think about that context. You have to imagine the water lapping against that ship, the smell of fish and perspiration, the disciples' calloused hands holding on to those heavy nets. And Jesus comes and says *Follow me*. They're making a good living at this fishing. I don't know if you noticed in the story, it said, "They left the hired hands behind." They're doing well enough to have hired hands in their fishing business. Why make someone leave behind a successful business with hired hands? What impels people to follow Jesus? Now, we can go back and interview those disciples and say "Why did you go?" I try to think about it – I

like the fact that the lectionary today pairs this story with Psalm 62, which says *For God alone my soul waits*. I would suggest to you that the disciples had been waiting all their lives for Jesus. Now if you had asked them, they would never have said "I've been waiting all my life for Jesus." They thought they were waiting for the next big haul of fish. They thought they were waiting for retirement. They may have thought "I'm waiting to meet Miss Right." They may have been waiting to have grandchildren one day. Who knows? They were waiting for something, but in their soul of souls, what they really were waiting for was Jesus, even though they didn't know that was what they were waiting for. And once he showed up, they realized "Ah, he's the one, he's the one, finally, the one we've been waiting for." Maybe – we don't know – maybe the disciples were going through a very, very tough time. There's an aspect to the story that I had forgotten or hadn't thought of until this week. I pulled a commentary off my shelf written by a great scholar from Duke University. That's where they have great scholars, you know, not a great basketball team now, but great scholars. And Joel Marcus points out that

this event probably happened at night. This is interesting, isn't it? We know that in the fishing business and in Galilee in the first century, by day the disciples cleaned the fish, sold the fish and mended their nets, tried to get a nap because then they would go out at night to catch the fish. That's different, isn't it? Jesus shows up when it's dark. Jesus shows up at night and calls the disciples. That may just be night, but it might also be a symbol, right? Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night when it's dark. Maybe you and I miss out on Jesus' coming until it's nighttime when it's dark and we're in some dark night of the soul. Maybe that's when we realize that Jesus has come. There's a third possibility, that these disciples may just be restless. They've got a good fishing business with hired hands, but maybe that's not really working for them so well.

I talked recently with an attorney in his mid-forties, very successful with the law. He says, "It's just not cutting it for me. I'm good at it; the rewards are tremendous, but I just have this nagging emptiness inside. It's just not doing it for me. There must be something else." When you

feel restless like this, what you want to do is you want to get rid of the restlessness, right? You want to feel better again, but the fact is when you feel that restlessness in your soul, that is Jesus saying to you *Follow me*. And we may be grateful for that restlessness, which is Jesus calling us home...

I have three thoughts about all this, and then we'll be done. The first is this: Jesus showed up at the office. It's hard to think about that. The fishing boat was the office for the disciples. It's not that they left the office to go to some religious place and there they met Jesus. No, Jesus came to them in their office, in their work place. Jesus knew a work place. He himself had been a carpenter, or perhaps it means stonemason. The Apostle Paul was a tanner. He dealt in leather goods. The gospel shows up at the office – let me suggest to you – or it doesn't show up at all. If you can't be a person of faith at work, then it's not really meaningful to be a person of faith anywhere. If you can't love Jesus at work, then maybe it's just really not a big enough deal to bother with. Somebody said to me awhile back, "They don't

let us pray where I work." I said, "Really? Really? They can prevent you where you work from speaking with God, really?" Jesus shows up at the office.

One of the things that I've spent a lot of time on in my life is to try to help people think about, not just having a career, but also having a calling. It's not just a matter of getting on the career ladder and doing better and better, but the question is, What is God calling you to do? What is God calling a restless 45-year-old attorney to do? What is God calling you to do? Maybe God is calling you to do something new or maybe God is calling you to keep doing what you've been doing, but if that's the case, God is calling you then to do what you do in a certain way. How do you serve God in what you do?

I read this thing the other day. I'm sure it's a fact, but it seemed so strange, it just can't be true, but it's in the history books, so it must be true. In the 1965 World Series, Sandy Koufax was due to pitch a critical game in the series and he said "It's Yom Kippur. I can't work on Yom

Kippur." Did that really happen? That just seems unbelievable to us. And the fact that it seems unbelievable to us shows how jaded and lost we are. And for religious reasons somebody might not do something as cool as pitching in the World Series.

How do we do what we do? I've shared with you before about my grandfather, Papa Howell. He was a rural mail carrier. I guess he could have just said, "Well, this is my job and I'll get the mail in the right boxes, and I'll take my paycheck home, and that will be the meaning of my work." But instead, he carried out his rural mail carrying as if he were on a mission from God. He used to put me in the car with him – that's probably against the law now – and we would ride around and he would stop and he would pray with little old ladies along the way and would deliver medicine to shut-ins and would give candy to children. He always carried a Bible with him. That probably is against the law for postal carriers today. Sometimes he would stop and he would read a few verses with somebody. He blessed an entire

community because of the way he fulfilled his job.

Sometimes we try to talk to young people about this. Our family, we're in the throes of college selection and – how do you make a college selection? You know, you get to the highest school in the picking order that you can get into or it's go to the school that is the most fun. The question is, Where does God want you to go to school? What does God want you to study? What does God want you to do? What is God calling you to so that you can make a difference in the world? But we can't just ask young people to do that if the rest of us are not willing to say, "Lord, what do you want me to be doing? How do you want me to do what I'm doing?" Jesus says *Follow me*.

And then there's this. It's Jesus who calls. It's not just one more business person in the fishing business. It's not just one person asking them to go play golf or something. It's Jesus who calls, and it says their response was immediate and their response is total, and the most amazing words in this passage are *They left their nets and*

*followed him.* It's amazing, isn't it? They left their nets with their livelihood, their nets with their security, their nets with their whole life that they were familiar with, and it says that they could. You would think if they were smart, they'd have tried to haul those nets with them, but we know the first century fishing nets were just too big and cumbersome to carry very far. So, instead of hanging onto their nets, they put down their nets and they followed Jesus. The question that we have to ask ourselves is, "What am I clinging to that keeps me from following Jesus? What am I hanging onto that keeps me from following Jesus?"

And then there's the last thing. There must be a passage missing in the Gospels or maybe it's one of those lost Gospels that hasn't been found yet that could fill out the story. I'm certain that there is something missing because it's a curious jump, isn't it? We go from Jesus saying *Follow me* and then it says *They put down their nets and followed him.* There had to be a conversation in between. And the conversation goes like this. Jesus says *Follow me* and Peter says, "Where?" And Andrew says, "How's it

going to work out?" And James says, "When are we going to come back?" We always want to know these things, don't we? Like "Oh God, yes I'll follow, but are you sure it's going to be good? Is it going to pay off for me? Will I enjoy it? Will it be safe there? When will I get back to my life as I know it?" But Jesus just says *Follow me* and in Jesus' view it seems to be enough that we'll be near him. We don't know how it's going to work out and it doesn't matter because we're near Jesus. *Follow me*. We'll be better at this, by the way, because if you think about your life, this happens all the time. You make big plans and arrangements for your life, make all kinds of plans and we're prepared for various contingencies. I have a financial planner – this is a very minor position for him to be holding in life, isn't it? We make plans and we think about getting ready for the future and then what always happens is the most important thing that happens in life is something you weren't ready for, and it would never have crossed your mind that it could even happen, but that's actually the defining moment in your life and you can't be ready for it. You wouldn't even have thought of it. We ought to be good at it. Jesus

says *Follow me* and we want to say "Where?" But Jesus just says *Follow me*. Just come, just get started. You'll be near me and we'll be all right.

I was thinking about this question this week. Where did the disciples wind up? I was in this room when I was thinking about it, and I looked up and I said where the disciples were going, they were going to the windows. There they are. They're all around us – Peter, John, James, Andrew and Phillip. They're all around us every Sunday, and I like that. Jesus calls them to go to the windows. What do those windows do? Those windows take the light that comes from God and they refract that light in a way that what we see in here is color and beauty and an amazing life story. God calls you and me to go to the windows to become those who refract the very life of God so that despite our foibles and our inability, through us, somehow, people get a glimpse of the beauty of God. God called the disciples to the windows. What that symbolizes is that they're a part of the communion of the saints, that God's people who dwell eternally in bliss with Christ in heaven are always

surrounding us and it is our destiny to join them in that glorious fellowship. This world is not all there is. We are just here for a very short time. When Jesus says *Follow me*, where he wants us to be with him ultimately is in eternity with God, the angels, the archangels, the disciples and saints, the holy host of God's people singing praises to God at all times. Brothers and sisters, at the end of the day there's only one, only one thing that matters and that's how you respond to Jesus' invitation when he says to you *Follow me*. There's not really anything else. Jesus says *Follow me*, and the question is, "How will we answer?"

*Follow me. Amen.*