



## “Come, Follow Me”

*Mark 1:14-20; John 1:35-42*

***A simple invitation can be a call to a new life of faithfulness.***

This week, we begin a series on Peter. Not about his writings, but about the man. This man who walked beside Jesus for more than two years, seeing Jesus at work and sitting at Jesus’ feet to learn. This man who would swear his undying devotion to Jesus one moment and deny Jesus three times soon after. This man who would be filled with

the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, preach a courageous sermon, and become one of God’s mighty apostles. Like all of us, Peter’s story begins with Jesus and a simple instruction: “Come, follow me.”

### ***“Everyone needs Jesus”***

A true statement: we all do need Jesus. Not because Jesus is Solver-of-All-Problems, for he’s not. But because, until we come to faith in Christ, we are estranged from the One who made us and loves us. Without Jesus, our search for meaning and purpose will necessarily lead us to frustration and disappointment. If we are truly made in God’s image, how could we ignore God and hope to be the people we were created to be?

The world looks for answers and yet the “answer” is as it has always been, is now, and always shall be: Jesus. That’s why we strive so hard to make First UMC a place where people can come and see Jesus at work in this small corner of God’s church. We must be like a magnet that God uses to draw people in so that they too can follow Christ. That’s why we strive to face outward, making sure we do all we can to help people who step onto our campus feel like they have come home.

### ***The invitation***

So, we invite, invite, and invite some more. It was this way with Jesus. Should it be any less so with us? In the space of just a few sentences at the beginning of his gospel, Mark tells us of Jesus’ bold invitation. In the first pronouncement of his public ministry, Jesus calls on the people to “repent, and believe in the good news.” Usually, we think of repentance as merely being sorry for what we did and see Jesus’ invitation as no more than a call to mend our sinful ways. But Jesus invited them to a much more profound understanding of repentance. In Jesus’ day, the Greek word we translate “repent” had political connotations. In essence, Jesus called on hearers to give up their agenda, even their way of being God’s people, and embrace Jesus’ agenda, Jesus’ aims, Jesus’ way of being the people of God. Jesus called on them to put their faith in the good news, to trust these words of proclamation: Jesus is Lord, not Caesar – Jesus!

In Mark’s gospel, we hardly have time to catch our breath after hearing Jesus’ first challenging invitation before Mark takes us to the seashore, where Jesus approaches Simon and Andrew and says “follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Note that Jesus doesn’t say “follow God,” rather he says, “follow me.” This alone would have been upsetting to first-century Jews. After all, the Jews had always known themselves as the chosen of God, called to follow God. Looking back from our day, we can see in Jesus’ invitation to follow him, a hint as to Jesus’ true nature and vocation. With the benefit of hindsight, we understand that Jesus’ invitation to follow him is an invitation from God. Indeed, Jesus’ invitation to Simon and Andrew and James and John parallels God’s invitation to Abraham nearly 2000 years before. God had invited Abraham to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). This invitation, accepted by Abraham, forever changed his life, the lives of his descendants, and all peoples, just as did the invitation accepted by Simon and Andrew.

## ***“Follow me”***

Though there are dozens of uses of the word “follow” in the New Testament (e.g., “whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” [Matt 10:38]), when telling us of Jesus’ first invitation to Simon (aka Peter) and Andrew, both Matthew and Mark use a Greek construction never used elsewhere in the same way, *deute + opiso*, literally translated, “come after.” Their choice of words is profoundly theological. *Opiso* means “behind” or “after,” as in going after God. As Kittel<sup>1</sup> notes, in the Old Testament, going after God means obedience. Hence, Jesus is not simply inviting Simon and Andrew to follow him; he is demanding total commitment. There can be no turning back. This is a call for total allegiance. Jesus’ disciples will be called to a life of obedience, self-denial, and sacrificial love. Jesus’ opponents saw this. Indeed, the Pharisees would complain that the people had “gone after” (*opiso*) Jesus (John 12:19). Paul also understood that he was abandoning his old life for a life of total commitment to Christ when he wrote “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it on my own: but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13).

## ***The calling of Simon Peter . . . and us***

Nearly all Christians have heard Jesus’ statement to Peter, “from now on you will fish for people.” The metaphor is clear enough to us – Peter had caught an abundance of fish and now he would catch people. But most of us don’t know that the metaphor is not original to Jesus. Centuries before God had spoken through Jeremiah of sending out “hordes of fishermen” to catch his people and bring them in, i.e., back together after the various dispersions and scatterings at the hands of invaders from the time of the Assyrians forward. Why? So that they could be judged as the gathered people of God.

But now Jesus has taken the metaphor and reshaped it. Peter and the rest would fish for people as instruments of God’s salvation. The time had come to proclaim the Good News and gather in all of humanity, not merely the Jews but the Gentiles as well. So Jesus is going to begin calling to his side some of those he had met earlier.

Peter and his partners were fisherman, just small businessmen making a living from the Sea of Galilee, but now they are being called into God’s service. They will leave their present lives behind, follow Jesus, and become his disciples. They will have purpose. They will be on a mission. They will see Jesus turn the world upside down, caring for and healing the marginalized, the weak, and the oppressed. They will hear him proclaim the arrival of God’s kingdom and the sure promise that God’s Day had arrived.

Clearly, Mark wants us to comprehend that Jesus’ invitation to Simon and Andrew, indeed to all those wishing to follow him, is a profoundly life-changing invitation every bit as challenging as God’s invitation to Abraham that he leave all he knows and embark on a journey to an unknown land that will be shown to him by God (Genesis 12:1). Also, like the invitation to Abraham, Jesus’ invitations to Simon and Andrew seem to be less like requests and more like commands. As Jesus’ parable of the great dinner (Luke 14:15-24) tells us, such invitations can be rejected only at great peril! So, we invite and we invite and we invite. “Follow me,” says Jesus. “Come and see,” say we (John 1:39, 46).

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<sup>1</sup> From Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged and translated by G. Bromily)