

In His Steps
Mark 1:14-20
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A group of people who live in London have a fishing ministry. The fishing ministry consists of this. Three people, all past the age of 80, hold a weekly bible study. The bible study meets in an old church, not a big church, just a small church, and every week these three people, all past the age of 80, get together to study the bible. What makes it a fishing ministry is they set up a sandwich board outside the door of the church. The sign says *Bible Study*. That's it. Well, on the sign is an arrow pointing inside. That is their fishing ministry. Just three people, all over the age of 80, having a weekly bible study, with a sign outside the door of the room where they meet that says *Bible Study*.

Now that fishing ministry might not sound like much to you, but it seems to me that this little fishing ministry could be quite inspiring. This fishing ministry all began 2,000 years ago when Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee. When he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, he said to them, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men and women." That was the inauguration of this fishing ministry. Two brothers were called, and 2,000 years later that call is still being carried out by three people, all over the age of 80, who gather once a week for bible study, with a sandwich board sign outside the door that says *Bible Study*...with an arrow.

The reason this fishing ministry is still being practiced 2,000 years later has everything to do with the one who does the calling. His name is Jesus. This story about Jesus is found in the Gospel of Mark. Mark has told us the gospel is good news. It is good news about Jesus Christ, or Jesus the Messiah, who is the Son of God. When Mark calls Jesus the Messiah he is saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of all God promised through the prophets of the Old Testament. John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus, and his prophecy was that when Jesus came, he would baptize with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus himself was baptized the heavens were torn open, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and the voice of the Father in heaven said, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Jesus spends time in the desert, time in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan for forty days. The arrest of John the Baptist serves as a catalyst for Jesus to begin proclaiming his message, which is direct and dramatic. "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

This story doesn't make any sense if Jesus is just another prophet, just another charismatic figure, just another dynamic personality, just another miracle worker. Mark has made it abundantly clear that God is doing something unique, and something compelling in and through Jesus. Jesus doesn't announce just another religious movement. His message is that the kingdom of heaven has come near, that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. His call calls for a decision. I will ignore the call...I will say no to the call...I will stay where I am doing what I was doing...or...or I will answer the call. I will leave behind my old life and throw my lot in with this man who calls me to follow.

Perhaps those first disciples, Simon and Andrew, and soon James and John, perhaps those first disciples had it easier. When Jesus called them to follow him, he was there. They were able to follow him as he traveled throughout Galilee. They were able to walk in his footsteps, to see him in action, to listen when he taught, to have a ring side seat at the healings and miracles and even the controversies. And perhaps they had it more difficult, for they were there when the wind and the waves rocked their helpless boat, when the demons reared their wicked heads, when the enemies challenged, when the food ran out, when the crowd turned ugly, when the soldiers raised their swords, and when the nails pierced his hands.

Whether it was easier or harder, their following is not the type of following we have. Jesus is not with us in the same physical way he was with the disciples. But the call to follow has never ceased. That same Peter who left his nets and followed Jesus stood up before a crowd in Jerusalem and he preached the gospel of Jesus, and when he was done he called on people to follow Jesus. For 2,000 years people have heard the call to follow Jesus, and they have wrestled with what that means. They have followed Jesus by studying the bible, the Word of God, by taking the words of Jesus to heart, by doing the things he asked those first followers to do, they have prayed, and they have relied on the Holy Spirit to fill them and encourage them and help them and empower them. For 2,000 years people have heard the good news that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and they have searched their heart, asking, "What does it mean for me to follow Jesus?" They have also asked, "What does it mean for me to be a fisher of men and women?"

I don't know those three people who established a fishing ministry in London by meeting for a weekly bible study with a sandwich board sign outside the door that said *Bible Study*. But my hunch is that every week they would be reminded of how God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, and how salvation and new life and hope and purpose is found in Jesus. My hunch is they rehearsed in their minds the story over and over again about the

suffering and death Jesus endured to prove God's love, how he gave his life as a ransom, how somehow his death and his resurrection have overcome the sin and sorrow and rebellion of this world so that those who follow him might find true life and meaning and purpose. My hunch is as they remembered and rehearsed that gospel story, that story of good news, they kept asking themselves, "And what does it mean for me, for us, to follow Jesus. And what does it mean for us to be fishers of men and women." Just three people, every week, studying the bible, with a sandwich board outside that said *Bible Study*. Just hoping and praying that someday the door would open and a fish would swim in and join their bible study.

I attended a presbytery meeting in Houston several years ago when a guy got up and told us a story. The guy who got up to speak was living in California. He became part of a church in California where an aging Presbyterian congregation had merged with a young independent church and he was studying to be an ordained Presbyterian minister. He felt the call to be a fisher of men and women. He was a young guy with a young guy's haircut and some tattoos and piercings, and he was trying with all his heart to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Jesus, and all he wanted to do was to be a fisherman, to help others find the forgiveness and new life that comes when you have Jesus Christ in your life.

This guy who got up to speak told us how he got caught, how some folks were fishing and he got hooked. He said he was really into punk rock music. He went to London to try to make it with a punk rock band. He had spiked hair like a guy in a punk rock band. He was walking through the streets of London with a bible, which he said was kind of funny because he had only been to church twice his entire life, and the second time he got the giggles and was kicked out of church. As he was walking around London with his punk rock hairdo and a bible in his hand he came across a sign outside a door that said *Bible Study*. And a small arrow pointed to the door. He said when he pulled the door open, and he said it was a huge door, the door appropriately made a creaking noise. He looked in. Three faces, each one more than 80 years old, turned toward him. They said, "Come in." With tears in his eyes he told us how those three people in the bible study, and then the rest of the church, which was about 15 people, they took him in, shepherded him, guided him in his faith, walked with him through the stories of the bible, and through it all introduced him to Jesus Christ. Now that guy who was a young punk rocker with a spiked hairdo is a pastor. Because of that fishing ministry of three people, all over the age of 80, having a bible study every week in London, with a little sign outside that said *Bible Study*, now there is a fishing ministry in a beach town in California, and more people are following Jesus and more people are asking Jesus how he wants them to be fishers of men and women.

This week we are going to have an Ash Wednesday service. On Ash Wednesday we remind ourselves that we are people who follow Jesus. We will follow Jesus through the Season of Lent. It is the perfect opportunity to ask ourselves again, or maybe for the first time, “What does it mean for me to follow Jesus? What does it mean for us to follow Jesus?” And it is the perfect opportunity to ask ourselves again, or maybe for the first time, “What does it mean for me to be a fisher of men and women? What does it mean for us to be fishers of men and women?” When we ask that question of God there is no limit to how God might speak to us, but a way that followers of Jesus have tried to seek God’s answer is through studying the bible. The week after Ash Wednesday we will start a 12 week study of the New Testament called Disciple Fast Track. The Bible Study is Wednesday night right at 7:15, right after our midweek worship service that we call Vespers. Bible Study and worship are two ways throughout the centuries people have pursued and practiced as they listen for God’s guidance on how to follow and how to fish. We will have daily readings in the Gospel of Mark. If you use this guide you will read Mark in the weeks between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Prayer is a key element in hearing from God what it means to follow and what it means to fish. Prayer is not only talking to God, it is listening.

As much as I love the story of that little fishing ministry in London, I want to say I believe in fishing ministry we have here in Westerly, Rhode Island, in southern New England. We’ve been known to put up a sandwich board sign or two ourselves. We’ve been known to put our line in the water. We’ve been known to cast our nets. And as much as today is about fishing, it is also about following. We’ve been known to have quite a few people asking themselves in real and serious and heartfelt ways, “What does it mean to follow Jesus?”

Sometimes a person opens the doors of this church and they find the type of love and welcome that changes their life. In November of 2016 we had a memorial service at church. A young man living in Florida had died tragically of a drug overdose. Because of family connections the parents wanted to have the memorial service in Westerly and to have the son buried at River Bend Cemetery. They were not members and really had no connection to our church, but that doesn’t matter. Families need places to mark life’s significant events and we were glad to host that service. I will also tell you it was one of the most heartbreaking experiences of my life as the young man’s mom sat in the front row and cried and cried at the death of her beloved son. When the special music began and the vocalists sang “Amazing Grace,” my mind had wandered into the deep and dark valley that parents walk when a child dies. As the words, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...” fell on my ears I could not raise my head.

Somewhere in the middle of December a letter arrived at church. It was from the young man's mother. The letter is addressed to the whole church, as it should be. She began, "In early November, my husband and I went through the heartache of having to bury our only child. He was only 28 years old. After years of struggle, he was finally taken from us by the insidious disease of addiction. He tried so hard, over and over, for many years, to overcome this malady of the body, mind and spirit. The morning of his death, his phone records show he was trying to contact a treatment center. The center he was calling did not do intakes on weekends. Within hours of those calls, he made his last, fatal mistake. The reason we wanted to write you this letter is to provide an expression of gratitude that our shock and grief prohibited us from doing around the time of his funeral service in your beautiful church...When our son died we were forced to make decisions we didn't dare allow ourselves to even think about prior to that day. We needed to decide how and where to put our son to rest. Here we were, sitting in a Florida hospital, far away from our home in New York. It occurred to me instantly that we would bring him home to Rhode Island, to Westerly, where my husband and I grew up, met each other, and got married. It was very clear to us that Westerly would always be our 'Home.' Our son loved visiting there. It meant visiting family and being surrounded by love.

On the day of the service, you helped us through each step. As I met friends and family upon arrival, I will never forget seeing two women I didn't recognize personally. They approached me and told me they were church members and that the community had been praying for us. I was so moved and grateful for their loving gesture of attendance. It personified the feeling inside the walls of your church and will forever be a comfort to us." She ends with some beautiful words of thanks and the assurance that we will be in their heart and prayers forever. We are here all the time, day in and day out, hoping and praying that when a person has a need, we can help. We keep our nets clean and our fishing line in the water. And sometimes God puts us at the right place and the right time to be fishers of men. That year on Christmas Eve the aunt and uncle of the young man who died quietly walked through the doors of our church, signed their names in our guestbook, and said, "It felt right to come and worship here tonight." On Christmas Eve we closed our service by singing Silent Night. We were all holding candles. We raised those candles high in the air on the final verse. Those candles could just as well have been fishing poles.

It is quite inspiring to me to think how 2,000 years after Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James and John, in a room in London, and a sanctuary in Rhode Island, and in hundreds of thousands if not millions of similar rooms and churches and dens and offices and athletic venues and hospitals and classrooms, there are fishing lines and bobbers and nets and flies and countless men and women and boys and girls who not only follow Jesus, they fish for him. I'm hoping we spend a lot of time thinking about the call of Jesus as we follow him these days of Lent, these days leading up to Easter. He calls us to follow. And he calls us to fish. There is simply no higher calling we can have upon our lives than to follow and to fish.