

January 21st, 2024

Mark 1:14-20 “An Urgent Mission”

I think I surprised some folks last week when I revealed how John's gospel had very little to say about Jesus calling Peter to be his disciple. I mean, come on John. This is Peter we're talking about here. Throughout the history of the church, Peter is recognized as Jesus' right-hand man. The Catholic church even considers Peter to be the first Pope. His birth name was Simon bar Jonas, but it was Jesus who named him “Petros” or “Peter” which literally means “rock” in Greek. In Matthew's gospel, after Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus says, “And I say also unto thee, Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (And yes, when I quote the Bible in the King James that means I memorized it in Vacation Bible School.) As I mentioned last week, it's not that Peter didn't play a big part in John's gospel. He did, especially during the last week of Jesus' life. It's just that John didn't pay much attention to how he became a disciple. John's gospel has Andrew introducing his brother Simon to Jesus and Jesus says, “You are Simon, son of Jonas. You are to be called Peter.” And that was it. John seemed much more interested in *Nathanael's* call which is what we talked about last week, and I'm glad we did because poor ol' Nathanael doesn't get nearly the attention he deserves. Was it kind of a weird story? Yes. But we learned something didn't we? Well, as good fortune has this week, the lectionary gives us Mark's version of how Peter, Andrew, James, and John became disciples. Thank you Mark and thank you editorial committee that puts the New Common Lectionary together. This is familiar territory. This is where we get the classic, “follow me and I will make you fishers of men” line. This is the version that three of the four gospel writers give us.

But ... before we unpack Mark's take on Peter's call, I want to talk about stories in general. One of my favorite types of stories that you often find in books and movies and other literature is the “band of heroes” theme. This is when a team of heroes who have different talents,

traits and personalities are rounded up to overcome an enemy that seems undefeatable. Two of the best examples in cinema are Akira Kurosawa's 1954 film *Seven Samurai* and its American counterpart *The Magnificent Seven* which came out in 1960 and was directed by John Sturges. Here's how the Internet Movie Database describes *Seven Samurai* – "Farmers from a village exploited by bandits hire a veteran samurai for protection, who gathers six other samurai to join him." Here's how the same website describes the *Magnificent Seven* – "Seven gunfighters are hired by Mexican peasants to liberate their village from oppressive bandits." A lot of folks think, "Wow, what a blatant rip off! How in the world do writers get away with that? That's just awful for someone to take a great original idea like Kurosawa's and plagiarize it." Well, before we start pointing fingers at John Sturges, let's go back in time to 13th Century BC Greece and take a look at the epic poem *Seven from Thebes*. It's about seven Greek warrior-heroes who launched a campaign against the city of Thebes to restore one of them to the throne of his father, King Oedipus. Not quite the same plot, but it's similar. Was Akira Kurosawa engaged in some plagiarism here? No. Not at all.

When we started our Faith in Films ministry here at the church fourteen years ago, I introduced folks to the idea of "meta-themes." These are reoccurring themes that happen in story-telling. In fact, back in 2004, journalist and author Christopher Booker concluded that there are only seven themes to any story that has ever been told: 1. Overcoming a monster 2. Rags to riches. 3. The quest. 4. Voyage and return. 5. Comedy. 6. Tragedy. 7. Rebirth. This makes sense, because *Seven from Thebes*, *Seven Samurai*, and the *Magnificent Seven* all fall under the "quest" meta-theme. But so do *Lord of the Rings*, the *Untouchables*, the *Avengers* and hundreds of other stories. It's just that these three can be sub-categorized as, "a band of seven heroes go on a quest to protect innocent people from a villain." And when you ponder that for a bit, you realize that some of these stories can also fit in the broad category of "overcoming a monster" as in the case of the *Avengers*. "Voyage and return" also applies as in the case of *Lord of the Rings*. As the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible says, "What has been will be again, what has

been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” In other words, nothing is truly original. But is this something that only applies to literature? Or does it apply to *all* stories, including our *life* stories? When I look back on Booker’s seven meta-themes I think, “Well, I’m still waiting on rags to riches, but everything else just explains different seasons of my life.” Comedy, tragedy, quest, voyage and return, overcoming a monster, rebirth. I’ve experienced them all to some degree and feel like I’m only in the closing chapters of Act II of my life story. But then, none of us really know how many years we have on this earth, so who’s to say where we are at any given time in our life story.

Candy Chang, creator of the “Before I Die” campaign thought about this quite a bit after one of her dearest friends died unexpectedly. All of sudden she felt this sense of urgency that she’d never felt before. Her grief awakened her from living a life of complacency to a life of discovering what was truly meaningful. So she found an abandoned piece of property in New Orleans not far from where she lived and thought, “I wonder how I can make this a space where people can connect? How do I make this neglected space into constructive space? How can I make a place of loneliness into a reminder that we are not alone?” So, she turned the house into a chalkboard. She wrote the phrase, “Before I die, I want to ...” and left the rest blank. The blank space was an invitation for folks to complete the sentence with their own words. What people wrote ranged from silly to profound, from sadness and regret to hope and joy. “Before I die, I want to sing for millions.” “I want to plant a tree.” “I want to live off the grid.” “I want to meet my birth parents.” “I want to ride the world’s scariest roller coaster.” “I want to hold my loved one just one more time.” “I want to follow my childhood dream.”

From their ordinary work on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus awakened his soon-to-be disciples to a new sense of meaning and life-changing purpose that compelled them to drop what they were doing *right away* and follow him. Jesus wasn’t just gathering his “magnificent twelve” to

go challenge King Herod and Caesar for bullying God's people. That was part of it, but his primary goal was calling them to change their hearts and lives and to trust the good news that God is reconciling the world. But there was this deep sense of urgency in his invitation. Jesus was near the end of the third act of his life story. This was his last chance to make sure that his message to the world would continue after his death. As for the disciples, their lives were about to be transformed as they entered into a new chapter of their life's story. They were in various stages of their life story. The gospel writers were never clear about their age or which chapter of their lives they were in, but I imagine that they all came from different places - different chapters – different generations. But what these men who Jesus called on the Sea of Galilee that day had in common was that they were moved by Jesus' message and his call to discipleship.

If you haven't heard by now, Mark is my favorite of the four gospel writers. Most scholars believe it's the earliest written gospel, and therefore the one closest to the source material. Mark doesn't have much theological commentary compared to the other gospel writers, and it's kind of "bare bones" in the way it lays out Jesus' life story. As someone whose desire is for the church to re-capture the spirit and practice of the earliest church, I appreciate its simplicity. But what I love most about Mark is his sense of urgency. One of the most common words that Mark uses is "immediately." Our professors in seminary used to give us passages from the gospels in Greek and we were supposed to identify which gospel they came from by recognizing the style, vocabulary, and themes of the various gospel writers. Matthew and Luke were the hardest because they were very similar to each other. John and Mark were the easiest. John was written in the easiest to read Greek and was vastly different in style and content than the other three. Mark is pretty easy to identify because he used the word "immediately" 41 times in his gospel. According to Mark, Jesus was baptized by John in three verses, tempted by the devil in the wilderness in two sentences, and the next thing you know he's gathering his disciples, casting out demons, healing people, feeding people, and never slowed down for a break until the

story ended 15 chapters later. There is a sense of urgency to Mark's gospel that appeals to me, and I always encourage folks to read this gospel first if they've never read a gospel all the way through.

Back to the seven samurai. Jesus is gathering us and calling us with the same sense of urgency as he called Peter, Andrew, James, and John. There are so many things that we have to offer the world as Jesus' disciples. Jesus clearly has something to accomplish, although the goal may not be immediately revealed to us. What is it about Jesus' mission and ministry would cause you to "drop your nets" like Peter and follow Jesus? What are some things that we can do as a congregation that will not only transform our life stories, but would transform the life stories of others? What urgent mission might God be calling *you* to do?

Believe it or not, we only have three more Sundays until Lenten season. Consider this a preview of the kind of work we'll be doing as we look at how Jesus calls us to work out our faith and our call. We call ourselves Disciples because we believe that like Peter, Andrew, James, John, Nathanael, Philip, James, Thomas, Simon the Zealot, Matthew, Thaddeus and even Judas we are each and all partners in Christ's service and that our life stories are deeply and inseparably connected to Jesus' life story. May we recognize the urgency of our mission to bring God's message of reconciliation into a deeply divided world.