

Sermon (1/21/18, Luke 1: 14-20):

I've taken to watching a new television series called 'The Good Doctor'. It tells the story of a high functioning autistic young man whose brilliance has led him to be an intern at a hospital. As you might suspect, life is far from easy for him.

In a recent episode, this 'Good Doctor' takes off after a crisis at the hospital. In an effort to run away from it all, he hooks up with a young, free spirited woman who suggests that they both take an impromptu road trip to 'clear the mind and soul'. After some doing, she finally convinced the Good Doctor to join her and off they went in her fancy sport's car to 'where ever the car decided to lead them'.

The mere thought of doing such a thing, makes me anxious. I'm just not wired that way. I could never and nor have I ever been so free-spirited. Few things I do are not preceded by careful thought and deliberate planning. Heck, even when I set out for chores on Saturday mornings, I organize my stops to make sure there is a methodical order to them.

Few things I do are done on impulse. I plan for vacations months in advance. When I'm choosing a movie to see, I carefully read the synopses and reviews on Fandango. Big purchases are often preceded by hours spent on the computer researching options and reading reviews. When my time is stretched here at the church, infringing on my ability to plan, it makes me anxious.

I am a careful planner, deliberately considering the many dynamics of the decisions I need to make. I am deliberate and thoughtful, not a whatever-strikes-my-fancy sort of guy.

In some ways, our culture trains us to be this way, and that's not entirely a criticism. It cautions us to plan for our retirement when we're young. When we register for a procedure at a hospital, we're asked about Advance Directives and Medical Proxies. We buy house insurance and life insurance to protect ourselves from the unpredictable. As we prepare for life after College, the thought of entering the work force and procuring a job that will pay us a wage we can live on weighs heavy.

You will understand then, why today's passage triggers more questions for me than answers; more resistance than attraction. When I read it, I pause after almost every word wondering how this could be. It's a difficult passage to relate to. It just feels so unrealistic.

We are still in chapter one of Mark and, while Jesus is still drying off from his baptism, he's out wandering the by-ways, looking for followers. Jesus' ministry does not begin with a spectacular firework display or a well-choreographed announcement of his intentions to run for the title of Messiah. The first thing Jesus does, is seek a community of followers. A group of people whom he will teach and guide. A group of people whom he will love and seek support from. A group of people who will witness his miracles, his interactions with others, and be challenged but what they see and hear. A group of people who will tell his story and continue the story once Jesus is gone.

'As Jesus passed along Galilee...' We are given no indication that anyone on that shore had a clue as to who Jesus was. It was at the very start of his ministry, so he hadn't even garnered much of a reputation. Perhaps, he stood out as a stranger but little more than that.

First, he encounters Simon and Andrew. Just like every other day, they were tending to their fishing trade - casting nets into the sea from their boat, hauling it in, plucking fish from it to sell at market, and then repeating the process. For years upon years they had probably done this. Some days produced better results than others. It was their job, their vocation, the means by which they supported themselves and their families. It was what they knew, probably taught to them by their Dads when they were young lads. It's the only life they had ever known.

Along comes this stranger, this nobody, and he tells them to, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' Yes, that's it. It's almost enough to make you laugh! If we were reading this story for the first time, our initial reaction would be utter disbelief. This is how Jesus is going to staff his campaign? This is Jesus' plan to save the world?

We read on. "Immediately..." Mark uses that word a lot. One scene quickly leads to another. "Immediately, they dropped their nets and they followed him." What?

There's a sign on a local mattress store that invites people to give their mattresses a try. If, after a 120 days, they don't like it, they can return it. It seems like a crazy promise to me. I mean it's not like you can put a used mattress back on the sale's floor, right? I guess that's what it takes these days, though. No risk guarantees. If you don't like it, you can return it – no harm no foul.

Well, Jesus doesn't even offer that. There is no risk-free refund accompanying this invitation. There is not an explanation as to what the mission will be about. There's no disclosure form explaining the risks that are involved, the challenges they will face, or even how long the mission will take. What about their families? Were these two guys married? Did they have children? Did they have an extended family that depended on them? What would happen to their fishing business which had probably been passed down to them and which they had spent most of their lives keeping afloat. Well, these are certainly questions I would have wrestled with!

There are so many questions this scene raises. What was it about Jesus that provoked them to abandon everything? What was it about Simon and John that allowed them to respond as they did?

Going a little farther, with Andrew and Simon now in tow, Jesus encounters another pair of fishermen. This time their boat is tied up on the shore and they are repairing their nets after fishing all night. It's the tail end of their work day. They're probably exhausted and anxious to get home. It's been a long night.

Their Dad is with them, helping them close up shop. Similarly, Jesus calls them with as few words and as little an explanation as he used when calling Simon and Andrew.

Okay, we think, maybe Andrew and Simon were an anomaly. Maybe Jesus caught them at a good time. Maybe they had only a hand full of fish in their boat after a long night's work. Maybe they were just fed up with the whole thing. Maybe they saw in Jesus a way out and they were the kind of people who could take off on a whim.

Certainly, James and John would be different, right? Certainly, the odds of them dropping everything and following Jesus too were slim.

“Immediately...” There’s that word again. “Immediately they left their nets, their Dad, their crew behind and followed Jesus.”

What? You’ve got to be kidding me? What about their poor Dad left sitting there, alone, in their boat? His sons were probably his best hope for keeping his fishing business afloat. I mean what happened to that little commandment, ‘Honor your father and mother.’

Please tell me what Jesus did to produce such a magnetic pull! Was it the look on his face? If it was, I want it. It would particularly come in handy when I’m looking for volunteers.

Was it the way Jesus asked? Did he have that rare ability to ask for things in such a way that people couldn’t help but to say ‘yes’ even before they realized what they were really saying ‘yes’ to? Was there a kind of aura around Jesus that pulled people in, even when they were wired to be cautious like me. If it was, I want in on that aura too!

Like I said, this is one difficult passage. I don’t know if it’s just because of my hyper cautious personality, but I don’t get it. I just don’t get it. It rubs against the grain of everything I know. It rubs against the grain of what most of us are taught. It rubs against the grain of what seems wise and prudent.

You know what’s interesting, though? Over the years I have thought often about that moment in my life when I felt called. It was a moment that dramatically changed the direction my life was going in. It came out of the blue like Jesus showing up on that shore. It overwhelmed me in an instant like Andrew, Simon, James and John experienced. It irresistibly pulled even me to step out of my safety zone and take a risk, which was so out of character for me.

At the time, I had a full-time job. I was making strides in moving up the ranks. I was making a fairly decent wage. I was even being considered for a promotion.

I had originally taken the job with the intention to pay off some of my school loans and then head off to Seminary to be a full-time student. Leaving that job, however, with its paycheck, benefits and other potential perks, proved to be a lot harder than I anticipated. In good ‘David Jones’ fashion I kept tallying up the pluses and minuses and the minuses kept

winning out. It felt risky, even foolish but then Jesus walked by. His words were few. 'It's time.' I heard him silently say. And, well, I knew, I just knew, it was time. No whys, or hows, or maybes, or what ifs.

It hasn't been an easy road. Being a Pastor in a mainline church during this time in history has been pretty tough stuff. What's interesting, though, is that when things felt like they were about to bottom out; when I was feeling vulnerable, frightened and overwhelmed, the first thing that has always come to mind was that moment when Jesus simply said, 'It's time'. It's kept me going through some pretty grim times. It's hard to explain, but in and through that moment, I sensed and continue to sense that I will never be alone. Come what may, come hell or high water, God will make a way like he did when splitting the Red Sea and when he turned Good Friday into Easter morning. And much to even my surprise, I'm still here. I'm still trying and still hoping. It's hard to figure out but, maybe, this is just one of things in life that we're supposed to trust more than understand.

No matter how we're wired, no matter how uncomfortable it might make us feel, there are moments when all of us, as individuals and as a church, will need to drop our safety nets. It's the way this Jesus works. He shows up out of the blue, nudges us out of our routines, surprises by calling us by name, throws a monkey wrench into our best laid plans, interrupts our attempts to be in charge and control, refutes our efforts to be cautious and calculating and says, 'Follow me.' And, for reasons unexplainable, we go, we follow, we risk, we do what even we can't believe we're doing. It's what Jesus does and, oddly enough, it's these very same moments that end up becoming the very memory that keeps us going even when the waters turn rough and the boat rocks with frightening vulnerability.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.