

Repenting and Believing
Mark 1:14-20

A Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany
January 22, 2012

Thomas Long says that one of the deepest human hungers is to be called for. Conversely, he says that one of the deepest human fears is that there is no one who cares enough for us to call for us. While it is true for all of us that there are times when we just want to be left alone, when we just want to be anonymous, I believe that Thomas Long is essentially right. As much as we may want to be left alone, we don't want to be alone. As much as we may want to be anonymous and unnoticed, we still want to know that we are known... that somebody, somewhere, knows us and cares for us and values us.

Long says that the scientist Carl Sagan, who was not a religious person, shared this hunger and fear. Sagan spent the latter part of his life in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence; that is, looking for other beings out there who may be calling to us. Someone asked him, "What if we never get any messages?" Sagan supposedly said, "It's a possibility, but it's a depressing thought to me that there might be no one in the universe trying to call us."

The central affirmation of the Bible... really, the premise on which the entire Bible is based... is that there is someone out there calling for us. God, the Bible proclaims, does not create the world and then become a passive observer, but continually communicates with us, comes to us, and calls for us.

This story in Mark's Gospel of the call of Jesus' first disciples is one of many, many stories that tell of the ways that God calls for us. Probably the most striking thing about this story is the sparseness of any detail: Jesus calls, saying, "follow me," and they do. There are no questions asked that one would expect to be asked, such as, "Follow you where?" or "Follow you for how long?" There is no indication of any kind of inner struggle on the part of the disciples... any weighing of the pros and cons. There is only the call and the response.

Julie Pennington-Russell suggests that perhaps Mark leaves all that out because it's really beside the point, which is that Jesus finds us, calls us, and the call is to follow him. To give the details of Simon's and Andrew's and James' and John's decision process would have made it too personal, as if the call was only for them. The call is meant for all of us, and the call is to follow. The call is not, "Come, be a Christian," or "Come, embrace this philosophy or this belief system;" the call is to follow Jesus. And the text says they left their nets and followed him.

If Julie Pennington-Russell is right and this call to follow Jesus comes to all of us, then what does it mean and what does it take for us to do that? I think the key to understanding just what following Jesus means and what it takes to do that is found in the message Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming. Mark says that message was this: "'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" Following Jesus means repenting and believing. As Brian Stoffregen says, the words Jesus uses for "repent" and "believe" imply "continued and repeated actions." To follow Jesus means to keep on repenting and to keep on believing. Following Jesus is to engage in repenting and believing as a calling or way of life.

Let's look at those two words. "Repent" is probably my least favorite biblical word – it may be my least favorite word, period. It brings up images of wild-eyed street-corner evangelists and Bible-thumping TV preachers. But more than that, it implies that I have something to repent of; that my way of acting, or living, or believing is somehow wrong. And if Brian Stoffregen is right about Jesus' use of the word, then no matter how much repenting I do, I still have more to do.

But repenting doesn't necessarily mean hanging your head in shame over what you've done and pledging to do differently. It may mean that, but it can also mean seeing things in a new way or having a moment of enlightenment. It can mean growth in understanding.

In his book, *Uh-Oh*, Robert Fulghum tells about a job that he absolutely hated. He hated the boss, he hated the food they were given to eat, he hated everything about it and decided to quit. He talked about it with another employee, and elderly gentleman named Sigmund Wollman, who was a survivor of Auschwitz. Wollman listened attentively to Fulghum's complaints, and then said: "Lissen. Lissen me. You know what's wrong with you? It's not the (food) and it's not the boss and it's not... the job.... You think you know everything, but you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire, then you have a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life is inconvenience. Life is lumpy. Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And will not annoy people like me so much."

Fulghum said it was like being hit right between the eyes with the truth – hard. It was a moment of enlightenment for him; a moment of repentance. He was jolted into re-examining his behavior and his attitudes. He grew in understanding, and he changed the way he lived. Ever since that time, he said, in times of stress or when he feels back up against a wall, he thinks of Sigmund Wollman and asks himself, “Inconvenience, or problem?” Understood this way, repenting is not something that makes me squirm. It’s something I not only see a continuing need for, but something I continually seek. Following Jesus is a process of continued growth in understanding and in personhood.

“Repent,” Jesus said, but he also said, “believe.” Believe in the good news, to be precise. Believe that God knows you, that God loves you, that God is ever more ready to give than we are to receive, that God is with you. Believing. It’s not just something you do, it’s something you keep doing. If we are going to follow Jesus, it’s not enough to rely on the time – sometime in the past – when we decided that, yes, I believe. It’s something we have to keep doing, because there is so much that challenges that belief; there is so much that will happen that will make that long-ago decision to believe seem naïve and childish.

The fact is that, as we follow Jesus, we will run into people and circumstances that are far, far away from the “Jesus loves me, this I know” faith that most of us grew up on. We will meet people who are so lost that it seems even God couldn’t find them. We will find ourselves in places that seem to perfectly fit the term, God-forsaken. We will be confronted by questions we cannot answer and by circumstances in which we don’t know what to do. And we will discover our own failures and shortcomings. We will miss opportunities; we will get things wrong; we will discover that our

capacity for love is far, far less than that of Jesus. So we must keep on believing, or else we won't be able to follow very far..

Tony Campolo says that sometimes students come to his office and tell him, "I don't believe in God anymore." He says that he always tells them the same thing: "That's OK, God still believes in you." If you find there are times when you just can't believe in God, when it seems that God isn't there, or when it seems God is not acting as you think God should, then believe that God believes in you.

When Jesus says, "Follow me," he doesn't mean to trudge along behind him, and he doesn't mean for as long as it seems worthwhile. He means for us to embrace a way of life; he means for us to grow and to trust; he means for us to keep on repenting and keep on believing.