

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Third Sunday after Epiphany • January 21, 2018**

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10 • Psalm 62:5-12 • 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 • Mark 1:14-20**

Today's gospel reading doesn't make sense. When people say they have a hard time believing the accounts of the gospel writers, they normally mean they have a hard time believing the miracles. The resurrection. The healings. The exorcisms. But today's gospel reading is one of the hardest stories to believe. And what makes it so hard to believe, ironically, isn't that it feels supernatural or like a relic of the first century. What makes it hard to believe is the faith of the people in the story. So it's hard to read the story without feeling like it makes a claim on us. Like if it were true, it would change the way we thought of ourselves. That the gospel might make some kind of claim on us, that we wouldn't be able to read it without being changed by it, is, of course, the whole point.

Just to recap. According to St. Mark, Jesus decides to leave home and to go Galilee, proclaiming, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news." And as he walks along the Sea of Galilee, he sees Simon and Andrew fishing. And Jesus says, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." And, according to Mark, they immediately, no questions, no discussion, no nothing, they immediately drop everything and go with him. So they start walking further along the shore and they see James and John. Jesus calls them the same way, and they just up and leave. What on earth is going on here?

One of the explanations that we hear sometimes is that these were fishermen who were down on their luck and looking for something to do. But James and John at least are professional fishermen. They are not hanging out drinking beer and whittling away an afternoon. If you are fishing with a boat with hired workers, then you are running a pretty sophisticated operation. You are not just hanging out looking for something to do. And yet when Jesus calls them, they just walk off the job.

What makes the story unbelievable, of course, isn't that the fishermen just walk off the job. They could just walk off the job for any number of reasons. Bad boss. Better offer somewhere else. The problem is that they walk off the job because some guy says he has good news. What news could possibly be so good that you would interrupt your entire life to go see what it's about?

News is always breaking, but it always seems to be breaking the wrong way. When the chryon flashes "BREAKING NEWS," when the push alert on your phone goes off, when a friend tells you they have news to share with you whenever you have time to talk, it's almost never followed by something good. For most of us, no news is good news.

And it was certainly the same for Andrew and Simon. This certainly wasn't the first time they heard a promise of good news. There were countless others who showed up before Jesus promising good news. Because when the Roman Empire would put down rebellions, when they would stamp out people who were getting restless, when they would try to scare people back into line, they would send out the military and the military would kill a bunch of people. And they would reclaim the land for their empire. And then while they were getting cleaned up, they would send a messenger out to announce to the other citizens that the Romans were back in control. And the messenger would announce that the empire had taken over the territory again. So there was a new reality that those people were going to deal with. And when the messenger showed up, their customary greeting was the Greek word euangelion, or what we would call "good news" or "gospel."

Andrew and Simon certainly would have heard their share of "good news" but none of it actually good. Just more proclamations that the Romans were in control. More coercion. More violence. More of the same. The phrase "the spread of the gospel" originally meant the spread of the Roman Empire. And then one day they're out fishing and a man approaches them. No armor. No

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weapons. Not official looking at all. Simply saying, “I have good news.” A man comes proclaiming the gospel. A gospel that totally reorders their lives. So. What is the good news exactly?

The word “gospel” is one of those words that clergy like to toss around without actually explaining. So what is it? When we talk about “preaching the gospel” or “law and gospel” or being “gospel oriented,” what do we actually mean by gospel? What news is so good that it would totally reorder your entire experience of life? What news is so captivating that you would put down your net immediately to go see more?

A few years ago *The Christian Century*, which is kind of like the *New York Times Magazine* for mainline Protestants, ran an interesting project where they got a bunch of pastors, scholars, Christian thinkers to try to figure that out. What exactly is the gospel? And because clergy have a tendency to filibuster their way out of difficult questions, they put a little stipulation on it. Which was that you could only do it in seven words.

You would think that even though we have different practices and traditions across the church, that we would have a similar idea of what the capital-G gospel is, right? Not at all. The answers were all over the place. They couldn’t come up with one single definition. Some of the answers were good. Someone described it as In Christ, God’s yes defeats our no. Some of them were just okay. We live by grace. That’s a little vague, but headed in the right direction. And some of them weren’t really good at all. Love your neighbor as yourself is good advice, but it’s not really good news unless you’re already doing it.

But the one that seemed to capture the gospel best was from Martin Marty, who put it this way. “God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow.” That little sentence says a lot. “God, through Jesus Christ” means that in Jesus we see the revelation of who God is. That Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection tell us what God really believes about us. That there’s no God “behind” Jesus. “Welcomes” means that God doesn’t just forgive your sins. God doesn’t just wipe the slate clean and say, “Come back next week.” “Welcomes” means that God invites us into relationship. That life with God isn’t a transaction. It’s a covenant that God makes with us. “You” means you personally. Not you in general but you in particular. That when you receive communion and hear, “The body of Christ given for you,” that “for you” means you. And “anyhow” means that we don’t have to hide our guilt, our fear, and our ambivalence from God. That God loves us in spite of all the ways we mess up. God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow. That’s the kind of good news that’s worth putting down your net for.

And because this good news that the kingdom of God is near is so important, so revelatory, so earth shattering, Jesus isn’t content to talk about it himself. He isn’t content to say, “Try it out if you want.” And so even while Jesus is calling the disciples to himself, he’s getting ready to send them out. No sooner does Jesus say, “Follow me” than he comes back and adds, “And I will make you fish for men and women.” When Jesus calls people to follow him, he invites them to into this new community. And as that community is being gathered, it is already being prepared to be sent out. The community doesn’t just exist for the sake of itself. It exists for the sake of the people outside of it. The community is a tool that Jesus uses to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God. Because the people who are outside of the church aren’t outside of what God has done in Jesus. They’re already included. They just haven’t heard about it yet.

This is one of the most foundational beliefs of the church, but it’s also one of the things we find easiest to forget. At one of our synod events last fall, the bishop mentioned a church down somewhere around Morris County. And they were working through some kind of site profile to call a pastor or get synodical assistance or something, and so they’re working through this form with a bunch of questions on it, and one of the questions was about how the church engages in outreach

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and evangelism. How would someone in the community who isn't a member find out about the ministry of the church? How would you learn about what the church is and does? Guess what their answer was. We don't do any outreach or evangelism. Don't do it. And the bishop said, "I don't understand. Why don't you do any outreach?" And their response was, "Well we don't need to do outreach. The church is full enough on Sundays that we don't need any more people to do the stuff we want to do."

Now it's possible that they're right on some level. It's possible that the church doesn't need any more people to keep doing what it is already doing. But the church doesn't exist for itself. We don't exist solely for our members. We exist for people who aren't members or part of our community. Even if that church doesn't need more members to keep doing what it's doing, there are certainly members of their community who need the church because they need to hear that the kingdom of God has come near. And if we aren't sure if the gospel we're proclaiming is worth saying, then it surely isn't going to be worth hearing.

When Jesus calls his disciples, he doesn't call them to save the world. Only God can do that. Your calling is not to be a savior. The calling that we get from Jesus is to be proclaimers of the gospel. People who announce that the kingdom of God has come near.

Do we always understand what God is up to? Not even close. Neither did John. Are we always going to have the right words? Are we going to get our priorities out of order? Probably. So did James. Are we always going to be faithful? No. Neither was Simon. But in Jesus Christ, God calls us anyhow. Even if it doesn't always make sense.

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