

Just a Step
Mark 1:14-20
Rev. Dan Schumacher

William Sloane Coffin has said, “[With faith,] first you leap, and then you grow wings.”

When was the last time you took a step in faith? When was the last time you took the leap?

Or are our lives so set that we can’t even imagine changing toothpaste, let alone taking a leap of faith?

Have we become so used to what we expect, that we’ve lost the capacity to imagine anything new?

Several years ago now, Brett Younger wrote an article about when our daily routines are interrupted by surprising moments. He says:

“The alarm goes off long before you want it to. The snooze button is not worth it, but it is tempting. You have to get to work. Or you have to get to work at home. Or you have learned that retirement is work.

The crowd going to work does not eat a healthy breakfast. A granola bar in your pocket. A chicken biscuit at the drive-through. Some of us have eaten fruit roll-ups for breakfast.

You glance at the headlines on your phone. You get more of your news from [Facebook] than Lester Holt.

You get to the office and are greeted by a coworker who is way too cheerful. You open your email and are reminded that you should not open your email first thing. You still have emails you did not want to deal with yesterday, and now you have new emails and still no desire to deal with them.

You are probably going to end up eating lunch at your desk again. You are doing the same things you did yesterday and the day before that. You are going to do the same things tomorrow and the day after that. It is Groundhog Day all over again.

You plan to get home as soon as possible, put on your pajamas way too early, and watch [The Office – because you have a co-worker who is exactly like Dwight Schrute. You watch more episodes than you intended before rolling off the couch half asleep and climbing the stairs to bed.]

Our lives are predictable, which can be dull, but that is not all bad. We no longer spend time hoping someone important will see how great we are and make our lives perfect.

We are used to the way things are. We know the people we live with, and how to keep them from driving us crazy. We have figured out the easiest way to get wherever we have to go. We know which restaurants work for us. We know which podcasts we listen to. We know which websites we frequent. Familiar can be comfortable, like putting on our pajamas at 7:00...

The idea that something life-changing could happen does not enter our minds. We are too old to fall in love, too tired to feel too excited, and too reasonable to do much that is unreasonable.

But there are moments in the middle of a regular day when something (or *someone*) stirs our soul and opens our eyes..." (*Funny When You Think About It*, 2-3).

When was the last time that happened to you? When was the last time you were going about your predictable, but comfortable life and something or someone interrupted your routine and stirred your soul? Opened your eyes? Moved you in a profound way?

Simon and Andrew had woken before dawn... as they did everyday. They had loaded up their nets, packed their lunches, and kissed their families goodbye... as they did every day. They carried their gear to the banks of the Sea of Galilee... as they did everyday. They sat their lunches up on the shore, untangled the nets, and marched into the breaking waves of the lake to start fishing... as they did everyday.

Theirs was a very physical type of fishing. We know this because of one Greek word in Mark's gospel — a verb that only appears once in all of the New Testament: *amphiballō*. It means to cast a fishing net, but more precisely, it means to caste a very particular kind of fishing net.

It was a circular net with weights all around the edge of the net, and it was attached to a long retrieve rope. To use it you would stand in the water and caste the net out as far as you could. The weights on the net would pull it down, trapping anything under its grasp. You'd pull that net back and see what you had caught. If there was anything worth keeping, you'd trudge your way back to dry land, empty the net into your basket, fold the net for the next cast and march back out to do it all again. Today, we'd call it cast net, and we'd use it to catch bait before going out to do some chartered deep sea fishing.

They did it all day, and it was back-breaking work — standing in the sun, the wind and reflection off the water burning your faces and eyes, fighting the push and pull of the tide, casting your net and hauling it in, casting your net and hauling it in, casting your net and hauling it in — all day long.

And it was tedious work — early mornings and late nights, working until you couldn't work even a minute longer, and then making a few more casts; coming home too tired to see and then mending the nets by lamplight.

This was the blue collar version of fishing for a living — an honorable trade that earned an honest living — but how long can the human body do such demanding work?

That same morning, Simon and Andrew looked down the shore from where they had already been fishing since before sunrise and they could see James and John, the rightful heirs to “Zebedee and Sons Fishing Co.” James and John sat in their boat alongside their father, who founded the company. He was barking orders at the other hired men. If they were the Sons of Thunder, he was where they got it from. You don’t build a successful commercial fishing operation without a little thunder in your belly.

James and John had woken before dawn, too... like they did everyday. Before they could smell the coffee brewing, their dad had begun to call from the kitchen, “Up and at ‘em boys. These fish aren’t going to catch themselves” ...like he did everyday (though the joke did not get funnier each time he said it). They rubbed the sleep from their eyes and followed in their dad’s footsteps as he made his way to the docks... like they did everyday and would for the rest of their lives. It’s not like they ever had a choice in the matter. They would be taking over the family business. You can’t call it “Zebedee and Sons Fishing” if there are no sons.

So every day was the same as the day before. Ancient Jews wouldn’t have gotten the reference to the movie, *Groundhog’s Day* — but if they did, Simon and Andrew and James and John would have understood implicitly the mind-numbing routines that made each day feel like every other day.

Wasn’t there more to life than this?

It’s not that work is bad or making a living is bad. Both of those things are good things — the ability to be a productive citizen, to provide for your family, to know the satisfaction of a hard day’s work, to know the pleasure of kicking your feet up after a hard day’s work.

These are all good things... but are they *summum bonum* of life? Are they the pinnacle of life? The ultimate meaning? The high water mark? Isn’t there more to life than this?

On that day that started out just like every other day, one thing was different. On that day, *Jesus* was walking down the shore of the lake. And as he walked along he saw Simon and Andrew, and he said, “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of people” (Mark 1:17).

And scripture says, “*Immediately*, they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18). Just dropped ‘em right where they were and walked away.

And then, Jesus saw James and John sitting in their dad’s boat mending the nets. He called them, and *immediately*, they left their father Zebedee in the boat and followed him (Mark 1:19-20). Just abandoned ship and joined the movement.

Now, generally speaking, Mark is not as interested in details as his counterparts. For example, I wonder if these two sets of brothers had ever met Jesus before this moment? Had they heard him speak somewhere before – maybe at an open mic night or at their favorite coffee shop? Did they already know Jesus’ message? Had they already bought into it? Mark does not bother to tell us.

What about their families? Were any of them married? Have kids? Did they abandon their families? How would their families be supported? With exception of Simon, Mark does not bother to tell us.

What about natural curiosity? What the heck does Jesus mean when he says, “I will make you fishers of people?” Would that entice *you* to follow?

Speaking from personal experience – and I have ample – no one, and I mean not one person, I have ever caught with a hook while fly fishing has appreciated it or wanted to follow Jesus afterwards. What in the world, then, does it mean to “become a fisher for people?” Mark doesn’t bother to tell us.

But that’s the call that Jesus issued. And Mark – ignoring all of the details that we might want – says that they followed, and not just eventually, but *immediately*.

Isn’t it fascinating that of all the details Mark ignores or rules as irrelevant to the purpose of the story, the one detail that Mark thinks is pertinent for us is the timing of their response? They didn’t follow eventually, but *immediately*.

Something about their encounter with Jesus woke them from the hypnotic routines of their daily lives and stirred something new in their souls. Something about their encounter with Jesus woke them up to the fact that today was *not* just like every other day. It was like a new kind of alarm clock had gone off in their lives and for the first time the scales were falling off their eyes. The life they’d longed for was right in front of them, and all they had to do was step out in faith.

The truth is, Simon and Andrew and James and John had absolutely no idea what this meant for their lives. They had no foreknowledge of what it would be like following a rabbi who would command them to feed thousands of people or to publicly debate scripture with scribes and Pharisees or to be tossed about in a ship on a stormy sea or to fear for their lives when he was arrested or to watch helplessly as he was crucified. They never knew where following Jesus would take them – and neither do we. It might just mean leaving everything we’ve ever known and joining Jesus on some previously unimagined road.

Will Willimon tells the story of when he was serving as a Bishop for the United Methodist Churches and lived in Birmingham, Alabama, and he was invited to come serve one morning at a local, Methodist-run homeless shelter.

He spent the morning scooping eggs and pouring coffee, and at the end of the breakfast, while some others were cleaning up the last of the dishes, he was speaking with one of the men who'd given much of his life to serving in the shelter — some 25 years.

Willimon said to the man, "I am just so impressed. You have given so much of your life and energy to these men. You must really enjoy working with the homeless."

The man shot him a sideways glance and said, "What are you, crazy?"

And Willimon said he was taken back a little bit by that.

The man went on, "*Nobody* enjoys working with these people. Nobody can even tolerate them. *That's* why they're homeless — no one can put up living with them."

Willimon said, "Well, then why are you here?"

And the man said, "Because Jesus put me here, you idiot! I'm here because Jesus called me, and I chose to follow him. That's why I'm here. *I* didn't choose it. Jesus did."

Sometimes saying yes to Jesus is like writing a blank check — you don't know how much is going to be asked of you. It may just be more than you ever wanted.

But maybe — and I suspect more often — Jesus calls us to follow him by staying right where we are; by staying put; by not abandoning everything we've ever known, but by living more faithfully right where we are.

I keep thinking of the story of Jesus healing the Gerasene demoniac. You remember the story: the man was believed to be absolutely bonkers by the town's people and left to haunt the countryside. But when he encountered the man, Jesus cast out the demons into the herd of pigs and healed him. Afterwards, the man begged Jesus that he might go with him and be one of his disciples. But Jesus said no, and sent him home to share the good news with his toughest audience — his family, his neighbors, the very people who had always thought him mad.

Sometimes Jesus calls us *from* something — from a chosen career path, from a life of comfort, from the mundane routines of our lives — but more often Jesus calls us *in the midst* of those things.

Rev. Gary Charles tells this story:

"Late one Friday many years ago, I had a knock on my office door. It was our church custodian, Lucille. I was sure that she was coming to my office to resign, as her adult disabled son had won the lottery, and she was going to be the beneficiary of newfound massive wealth.

As she took off her rubber gloves and took my hand, I could see tears forming. She said, 'Gary, everyone tells me that I should quit my job and travel and never look back.'

He's say that idea sounded pretty good to him.

"She took another breath and she said, 'But, I love my job. I love serving God by making God's house clean and a decent place for anyone and everyone who comes here. Gary, I want you to tell me what to do.'"

He paused to measure his response, but before he could say a word, she said, "Gary, I don't care what they say. I care what Jesus says, and he is calling me to stay right here" (asermonforeverysunday.com, Jan. 24, 2015).

Friends, when I read Mark's gospel, I find myself meeting the Jesus that Lucille knew — not the well-behaved Lord of my childhood who never expected much of us, but the relentless and transforming Lord who expects *everything* of us.

I keep meeting a Jesus who — whether he calls us *from* everything we've ever known or *in the midst* of it — never leaves us as he found us.

I keep meeting a Jesus who wants to transform our lives not just *eventually*, but *immediately*.

The question in Mark's gospel isn't "Will Jesus call?" but "Will we follow?"

It doesn't take much. No more than it took Simon or Andrew or James or John.

Just a little step. A little step in faith.

But just remember: with faith, first you leap, then you grow wings.

Amen.