

The Invitation

August 11, 2002

Background Study

This week, we begin an eight-week sermon series exploring our vision for St. Andrew, which is that we are “to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.” We will begin by taking a look at God’s invitation to us.

A Key Scripture Passage – Mark 1:14-20 (NRSV)

¹⁴Now after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Jesus’ Invitation

In the space of just a few sentences, Mark tells us of Jesus’ bold invitation. In the first pronouncement of his public ministry, Jesus calls on the people to “*repent, and believe in the good news.*” Usually, we think of repentance as merely being sorry for what we did and see Jesus’ invitation as no more than a call to mend our sinful ways. But, Jesus invites us to a much more profound understanding of repentance. In Jesus’ day, the Greek word we translate “repent” had political connotations. In essence, Jesus is calling on hearers to give up their agenda, even their way of being God’s people, and embrace Jesus’ agenda, Jesus’ aims, Jesus’ way of being the people of God. Jesus called on them to believe the good news, to believe these words of proclamation that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar – Jesus!¹

In Mark’s gospel, we hardly have time to catch our breath after hearing Jesus’ first challenging invitation before Mark takes us to the sea shore, where Jesus approaches Simon and Andrew and says “*follow me and I will make you fish for people.*” Note that Jesus doesn’t say “follow God,” rather he says, “follow me.” This alone would have been upsetting to many first-century Jews. After all, the Jews had always known themselves as the chosen of God, called to follow God. Looking back from our day, we can see in Jesus’ invitation to follow him, a hint as to Jesus’ true nature and vocation. With the benefit of hindsight, we understand that Jesus’ invitation to follow him is an invitation from God. Indeed, Jesus’ invitation to Simon and Andrew and James and John parallels God’s invitation to Abraham nearly 2000 years before. God had invited Abraham to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). This invitation, accepted by Abraham, forever changed his life, the lives of his descendents and all peoples, just as did the invitation accepted by Simon and Andrew!

¹ The Greek word translated “good news” is *evangelion*. In the Roman world of Jesus’ day, this was a word used to proclaim the birth of the emperor’s heir, the enthroning of a new emperor, and a great military victory. This proclamation, the *evangelion*, would be carried out to the provinces by messengers and heralds. The good news of Jesus is a proclamation that Jesus is Lord, in direct challenge to the proclamations of Caesar.

“Follow me”

Though there are dozens of uses of the word “follow” in the New Testament (e.g., “whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” [Matt 10:38]), when telling us of Jesus’ first invitation to Simon and Andrew, both Matthew and Mark use a Greek construction never used elsewhere in the same way, *deute + opiso*, literally, “come after.” Their choice of words is profoundly theological. *Opiso* means “behind” or “after,” as in going after God. As Kittel² notes, in the Old Testament, going after God means obedience! Hence, Jesus is not simply inviting Simon and Andrew to follow him, he is demanding total commitment. There can be no turning back. This is a call for total allegiance. Jesus’ disciples will be called to a life of obedience, self-denial, and sacrificial love. Jesus’ opponents saw this. Indeed, the Pharisees would complain that the people had “gone after” (*opiso*) Jesus (John 12:19). Paul also understood that he was abandoning his old life for a life of total commitment to Christ when he wrote “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it on my own: but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind (*opiso*!) and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13).

Clearly, Matthew and Mark want us to comprehend that Jesus’ invitation to Simon and Andrew, indeed to all those wishing to follow him, is a profoundly life-changing invitation every bit as challenging as God’s invitation to Abraham that he leave all he knows and embark on a journey to an unknown land that will be shown to him by God. Also, like the invitation to Abraham, Jesus’ invitations to Simon and Andrew seem to be less like requests and more like commands. As Jesus’ parable of the great dinner (Luke 14:15-24) tells us, such invitations can be rejected only at great peril!

God’s Invitation

We do not believe in a God who is remote or distant, some sort of absentee landlord who got everything started and then stepped aside. Such an uninvolved God is not the God of the Bible. Rather, Walter Brueggemann³ reminds us that God is always *for us* and *with us*. From the first stories in the Old Testament, we see that God is relentless in his pursuit of his people, inviting us to enter in a relationship with him and never abandoning us, despite our constant turning from him. God’s invitation extends from the invitation to Adam to “be fruitful and multiply,” through the invitations to Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah, Andrew, Peter, all the way to the final verses of Revelation: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let everyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift” (Rev 22:17).

In the coming weeks, we’ll take a look at the sort of relationships into which God invites us. Not only will we consider our relationship with God, but also our relationships with each other. We’ll look at what it really means to follow Jesus, embracing new and unexpected ways of being God’s people. Next week, we’ll examine the *covenant* God offers us. Covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible and is about the making and keeping of promises and commitments. Truly, God is the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper.

² From Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged and translated by G. Bromily)

³ Brueggemann, Walter. 1997. *The Bible Makes Sense*. Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary’s Press.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 6:11-22 God's invitation to Noah</p>	<p>Day 2 Exodus 3 God's invitation to Moses</p>
<p>Day 3 Isaiah 2:2-4 God's invitation to all the nations, written about 800 years before Jesus.</p>	<p>Day 4 John 1:35-51 Jesus' invitation to Andrew and others. Note what Andrew does after meeting Jesus for the first time!</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 14:1-24 The invitation and humility; Jesus' parable of the great dinner</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In Mark's gospel, Jesus' first public statement challenges listeners to "repent, and believe in the good news." What do you think he means by "repent?" How do you respond when you hear the word "repent?" What might this mean in your own life? What agenda do we really follow? Who sets our priorities? What is the good news in which we are called to believe? If it is truly a proclamation that Jesus is Lord, how would this change the priorities in your life?
2. Jesus came to Simon Peter and Andrew on the seashore and said "follow me" - in a most challenging way. Why do you think he didn't say "follow God?" Jesus' invitation is a call for total allegiance and obedience. So often, this seems to be very hard for us to hear or at least take seriously. Why? Many of us don't really want to be followers in life. What must we do to begin to really hear and live out Jesus' challenge?
3. Take a few moments and read Jesus' parable of the great dinner in Luke 14:15-25. In the parable, who is the host for the dinner? Who are the invited guests? Why might all these people have made excuses for not coming to the dinner? Does the host invite them again? What do you think of the host's idea to invite the needy?! Why do you think Jesus told this parable? What point is he trying to make? Why did he use a parable to make his point?
4. Whom does God invite to his banquet? To what sort of life does he invite them? Is there an RSVP? How should we explain this invitation to others? What is involved in our acceptance of the invitation?