

# *"Come, Follow Me"*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1<sup>st</sup> in a seven-part series

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*Mark 1:14–20 (NRSV)*

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

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

*John 1:35–42 (NRSV)*

<sup>35</sup> The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup> and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" <sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup> When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" <sup>39</sup> He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. <sup>40</sup> One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. <sup>41</sup> He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). <sup>42</sup> He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

*A simple invitation can be a call to a new life of faithfulness.*

This week, we begin a series on Peter. Not about his writings, but about the man. This man who walked beside Jesus for more than two years, seeing Jesus at work and sitting at Jesus' feet to learn. This man who would swear his undying devotion to Jesus one moment and deny Jesus three times soon after. This man who would be filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, preach a courageous sermon, and become one of God's mighty apostles. Like all of us, Peter's story begins with Jesus and a simple instruction: "Come, follow me."

*"Everyone needs Jesus"*

A true statement: we all do need Jesus. Not because Jesus is Solver-of-All-Problems, for he's not. But because, until we come to faith in Christ, we are estranged from the One who made us and loves us. Without Jesus, our search for meaning and purpose will necessarily lead us to frustration and disappointment. If we are truly made in God's image, how could we ignore God and hope to be the people we were created to be?

The world looks for answers and yet the "answer" is as it has always been, is now, and always shall be: Jesus. That's why we strive so hard to make St. Andrew a place where people can come and see Jesus at work in this small corner of his Church. We must be like a magnet that God uses to draw people in so that they too can follow Christ. That's why we strive to face outward, making sure we do all can to help people who step onto our campus feel like they have come home.

*The invitation*

So, we invite, invite, and invite some more. It was this way with Jesus. Should it be any less so with us? In the space of just a few sentences at the beginning of his gospel, 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 invited them to a much more profound understanding of repentance. In Jesus’ day, the Greek word we translate “repent” had political connotations. In essence, Jesus called 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 put their faith in the good news, to trust these words of proclamation: Jesus is Lord, not Caesar – Jesus! (see accompanying text box)

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Here you have it. If you are looking for a one-sentence description of Jesus’ ministry, this is it. These are the first words Jesus speaks in Mark’s gospel. So let’s take a closer look at them.

*Now is the time!* For centuries, the Jews had labored under foreign rule that was often brutal. They waited with great hope and anticipation for the day when God would again rule, when God’s kingdom would come, when all the world would see that YHWH is God. Jesus’ announces that their waiting is over – the time has come!

*Here comes God’s kingdom!* Jesus announces that, yes!, God’s rule is about to burst upon them; the story is coming to a climax. God will again be king. There will be no room for Caesar or any other pretenders to lordship. There will be only one Lord (and it will turn out to be Jesus!).

*Change your hearts and lives* Jesus is not inviting his fellow Jews to join some sort of social club. Rather, he invites them to recognize and to regret that they have been wrong-headed in their approach to being God’s people. Jesus invites them to abandon their own agendas and follow his. This is not about simply being sorry for what they did; Jesus calls them to turn 180° and take a new path.

*Trust this good news* The word “believe” is often used here, but it can throw us off here; it makes it all seem too intellectual. Instead, Jesus speaks here of trust, of embracing Jesus and his proclamation with our whole being. The good news is that Jesus is Lord, not anyone or anything else. Our loyalty and devotion must lie with Jesus.

In Mark’s gospel, we hardly have time to catch our breath after hearing Jesus’ first challenging invitation before Mark takes us to the seashore, 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 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 descendants, and all peoples, just as did the invitation accepted by Simon and Andrew.

*“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 (aka Peter) 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 Kittel<sup>1</sup> 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 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).

### Being the Light – Extending the Invitation

We know we are to be the light to the world but we are often unsure as to how to go about it. Sometimes we think it means we have to pull people out of their homes or stand on street corners passing out tracts. Sure, we ought to invite our neighbors to church with us and share the Good News with strangers, but the biblical understanding of invitation, of being the light to the world, extends to every part of our lives. We invite when we worship, when we learn, when we love, when we care, when we serve, when we work, when we play – every part of our life is to be an invitation and a witness to others.

Let me give you one example. We often don’t think of our own worship as an act of evangelism or invitation. But, when a person who is not a churchgoer visits our worship service, they are looking for three things. They want to feel the presence of God. They want to see the Christian church living out its faith – kindness, love, patience, service to others, and so on. Finally, they want to see the relevance of the faith for their lives.<sup>1</sup> Every Sunday, each of us, as a member of the St. Andrew community, is an important witness to the reality of Christ’s love and invitation to all persons. Just as sports heroes are unavoidably role models for our youth, we are always, in all times, and in all places, witnesses to the living reality and glory of Christ’s sacrificial love.

Peter understood this when he wrote to Christians suffering for their faith, “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles<sup>2</sup> to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Peter 2:11-12). Paul understood this when he wrote to the troubled church in Corinth, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1). Paul calls us to imitate Christ in all we do so that the glory of God will be visible to all and that all will be saved.

So what does it mean to be the light to the world? It means that we are to lift Jesus up for all the world to see, so that all the world might be drawn to him, enabling all the world to see his saving love. Because Jesus announced and inaugurated the arrival of God’s kingdom, we live in the “bright interval”<sup>3</sup> between Easter and the final, great consummation of the story, the renewal of all creation and the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21:1). The early Christians found great joy because they understood that they lived not in the last days but in the first days of a new age! We live in such days as well and we should find such joy, a joy that will shine for all to see, drawing them in, inviting them to join us in the community of God’s servant people.

1. This is from the survey and focus group research of George Barna.

2. For more on the “alien” status of Christians, see *Resident Aliens*, by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, 1989, Abingdon Press. They offer a challenging vision of what it means to be a Christian community.

3. from N. T. Wright. *The Challenge of Jesus*. 1999. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press

<sup>1</sup> From Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged and translated by G. Bromily)

### *The calling of Simon Peter . . . and us*

Nearly all Christians have heard Jesus' statement to Peter, "from now on you will fish for people." The metaphor is clear enough to us – Peter had caught an abundance of fish and now he would catch people. But most of us don't know that the metaphor is not original to Jesus. Centuries before God had spoken through Jeremiah of sending out "hordes of fishermen" to catch his people and bring them in, i.e., back together after the various dispersions and scatterings at the hands of invaders from the time of the Assyrians forward. Why? So that they could be judged as the gathered people of God.

But now Jesus has taken the metaphor and reshaped it. Peter and the rest would fish for people as instruments of God's salvation. The time had come to proclaim the Good News and gather in all of humanity, not merely the Jews but the Gentiles as well. So Jesus is going to begin calling to his side some of those he had met earlier.

Peter and his partners were fisherman, just small businessmen making a living from the Sea of Galilee, but now they are being called into God's service. They will leave their present lives behind, follow Jesus, and become his disciples. They will have purpose. They will be on a mission. They will see Jesus turn the world upside, caring and healing the marginalized and the weak and the oppressed. They will hear him proclaim the arrival of God's kingdom and the sure promise that God's Day had arrived.

Clearly, Mark wants 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 (Genesis 12:1). 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! So, we invite and we invite and we invite. "Follow me," says Jesus. "Come and see," say we (John 1:39, 46)

## **Scott Engle's Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *1 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

Beginning this week; *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew about the Bible*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.