

## **Powerful Witnesses**

Mark 1:14-20

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany &  
Annual Parish Meeting  
January 25, 2015

*Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."*

Mark 1:17

That Gospel story always baffles me.

Simon and Andrew, James and John, were literally going about their business when this man walks by and says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And, with that, with those few words, the four fishermen dropped what they were doing and just left. They didn't hesitate. They didn't think about it for a minute. The text says they left immediately, and it makes me wonder: Why? Why did they do that?

The four of them had other things to do, important things. They had a life and a career, family and friends. Then, Jesus came along and turned all that on its head. How could the fishermen just leave? What about their work? What about their family? It doesn't make any sense to me.

Then again, the call of God doesn't always make sense.

The call of God is an invitation by God to do something specific with your life, and every one of us here this morning has a call. We may not always feel that or believe that, but it's true. Each of us has a purpose in life. God has something in mind for all of us to do because all of us have something to contribute. We can make a difference in the world. We can have a positive impact on the lives of others by using the gifts God has given us, and that is exactly what God wants us to do and expects us to do.

As this Gospel story shows us, though, God's call is mysterious and surprising. It can catch us off guard and is often inconvenient, interrupting our regular routine, changing our agenda, pulling us in unexpected directions. God's call will certainly dare us to try something new and push us outside our comfort zone, making us feel a little apprehensive and insecure. If the path before us is too easy and straightforward, that is probably not the direction God is calling us to go. God calls us to step out in hope and trust.

We may not like that idea. We may not like the way it feels, but honestly, I think God does not really care about that. God does not call us to a specific purpose because it is convenient. God does not call us to do something because it fits in with our expectations and plans. God does not call us because of what we want. God calls us because of what God wants. God calls us for

reasons known only to God, and as the late, great preacher Peter Gomes once said: “Once God chooses you, you’re chosen.”<sup>1</sup>

So, having said all that, let me ask you this: what is God calling you to do, right now, at this point in your life? What is your purpose?

I know those are some pretty big questions, and you may not have any answers. But, but if you want to wrestle with those questions, if you want to search for answers, the first step is to listen. You have to spend time listening to that still, small voice speaking inside your heart and mind and soul. “Listen to your life,” writes Frederick Buechner. “See your life for the fathomless mystery that it is. Pay attention to what your life is telling you. Follow the clues of your heart. The place where God calls you is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus also calls communities to follow him, and here at Grace Church, the leadership spends a lot of time listening, trying to discern the exact direction he wants us to go. Five years ago, that listening led the Vestry to articulate our *Vision for the Future* and *Core Values*, which are printed on your bulletin insert, and every year, the Vestry gathers on retreat to review our *Vision for the Future* and ask ourselves those big questions: What is God calling us to do right now, at this point in our lives? What is our purpose?

For 2014, the answers to those questions can be found in our Annual Report. There you can read about our successful Capital Campaign which enabled us to update the heating and air conditioning systems, renovate the Undercroft, and refurbish the organ. You will see how we are becoming more environmentally friendly, how we started a Young Adult Ministry, how we served as a pilgrimage stop of the Diocese of Maryland’s *Trail of Souls*. You can learn more about the work of the Pennyworth Shop and the Day School and the Homeless Ministry. And, you will discover we welcomed almost 100 new members into the Grace Church family this year. On any given Sunday, we will have 280 people in worship, 64 children in Sunday School and 24 youth at Youth Group, not to mention the adults who participate in Adult Forums and small groups. We have helped connect people with God, helped them know Jesus better, and we have served those in need. It has been a pretty amazing year.

A few weeks ago, Bishop Mariann sent an email to the clergy of the diocese, asking us to provide her with some highlights from our parishes over the past year. She wanted our reflections as she began preparing for diocesan convention next weekend. In response, I sent her a list of things, many of which I just mentioned, and the next day, I received this email from her:

*Andrew, I just read these words. Such a powerful witness to God’s work among you and the faithfulness of the people at Grace. Thank you.*

Now, it is 2015, and as we begin start the year, I wonder how we will answer those big questions. Tell me: What would you like to see happen at Grace? What would you like to do?

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<sup>1</sup> *Biblical Wisdom*

<sup>2</sup> *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Beuchner*

One thing the church leadership would like to talk about is the Sunday experience here at Grace. Over the last 5 years, our attendance has grown by 40%, and from September to June, we often have more than 250 people attending the 10:30 service. Occasionally, we have as many as 300 people, which, as someone pointed out to me last week, exceeds the fire code for this building. While this growth is exciting and an incredible blessing, we also realize by typical church standards, our 10:30 service is “overcrowded,” and as we consider what to do about that, we want to hear from you about your Sunday church experience.

Besides that, though, how will we will powerful witnesses of God’s grace and love? What is God calling us to do right now, at this point in our lives?

Let’s listen together.

Amen.