

“Follow Me!”

Mark 1:16-20 ¹

As you probably remember, I’ve been a fan of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* for at least fifty years, and one of my favorite scenes takes place at the beginning of *The Hobbit*. As the story opens, a little Hobbit named Bilbo Baggins enjoys a comfortable and predictable life in his home in the Shire. On a particularly fine morning, the wizard, Gandalf, drops in for a surprise visit, and after a brief and pleasant conversation, Gandalf turns to Bilbo and says, “I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it’s very difficult to find anyone.”

Bilbo, who does not yet realize that this is Gandalf, replies, “I should think so—in these parts! We are plain, quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can’t think what anybody sees in them.”

Bilbo starts looking through his mail, hoping that the old man will leave. But Gandalf continues leaning on his staff, gazing at Bilbo until Bilbo angrily exclaims, “Good morning! We don’t want any adventures here, thank you! You might try over The Hill or across The Water,” by which he meant that the conversation was at an end.

When Gandalf reveals his true identity, Bilbo gasps, “Gandalf, Gandalf! Good gracious me! Not the wandering wizard who used to tell such wonderful tales at parties, about dragons and goblins and giants and the rescue of princesses? Not the Gandalf who was responsible for so many quiet lads and lasses going off into the Blue for mad adventures? Bless me . . . you used to upset things badly in these parts once upon a time. I beg your pardon, but I had no idea you were still in business.”

Gandalf replies, “It is I, and I will give you what you asked for.”

Bilbo objects, “I beg your pardon, I haven’t asked for anything!”

Gandalf says, “Yes, you have! Twice now. My pardon. I give it you. In fact, I will go so far as to send you on this adventure. Very amusing for me, very good for you and profitable too, very likely, if you ever get over it.”²

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 2, 2016. This encounter is also presented in Matthew 4:18-22 and Luke 5:1-11. See also John 1:35-51.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Ballantine, 1937, 1938, 1966), pp. 17-19. This exchange is as told in the 2012 movie, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, directed by Peter Jackson.

Can you sense the similarities between these two scenes? Tolkien was a devout Christian, and I think he may have had the second scene in mind while writing the first.

Like Gandalf at Bilbo's door, Mark presents Jesus as appearing suddenly and without warning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.³ He approaches Peter and Andrew, who are fishing by casting their nets from the shore, and makes no small talk. He just says "Follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people," and walks off.

According to the other Gospels, Peter and Andrew have had encounters with Jesus before, but Mark gives no such background. Jesus comes out of nowhere, commands them to follow Him, and they do so "at once." Presumably now with Peter and Andrew in tow, Jesus walks a little farther and issues the same command to James and John (who were likely kin to Him in some way), with the same immediate result.⁴

As we ponder what we have just witnessed, we might note that although James and John were working in a boat and had employees in their family fishing business, Peter and Andrew were fishing from the shore and may have been less well off, unable to afford a fishing boat. We might also note that Jesus didn't choose disciples from the educational institutions of the day. He didn't choose religious or civic leaders. He didn't choose people who were learned or wealthy. He chose ordinary folk—extremely ordinary, actually, like the fishermen on the *Andrea Gail* in *The Perfect Storm*.⁵

It's also interesting that Jesus didn't say to them, "I have a theological system that I would like you to investigate"; or "I have certain theories I would like you to think over"; or "I have an ethical system I would like to discuss with you." He simply said, as though it were a command, "**Follow me!**"

This would not be the last time these men would be amazed at the power that was released when Jesus spoke. They would hear Him say, "**Be quiet! Come out of him!**" and demons would flee (1:25). They would hear Him say, "**Quiet! Be still!**" and a deadly storm would instantly dissolve into peace (4:39). They would watch Him say, "**Little girl, get up!**" and the dead would be raised (5:41). He would say, "**Be opened!**" and the deaf would hear (7:34). He would say, "**May no one ever eat fruit from you again,**" and a fig tree would wither to its roots (11:14, 20). "**Follow me!**" He said, and their lives were never the same again.

Have you ever heard Jesus say to you, "**Follow Me!**"? I hope you have, because I am certain that He has said it to you, and probably many more times than once. Our word, "vocation," comes from the Latin *vocare*, "to call," and, while it can mean simply, "call," or "invite," it also carries the meaning "to summon," "to command." And the New Testament word for "the church"—*ekklesia*—means "the community of those who have been called." We are among those who have been summoned to follow Jesus.

Our initial call from God is to be *born again* (John 3:3)—to acknowledge our sinfulness and to accept God's offer of forgiveness and new life, purchased on Calvary's Cross. But to stop there is rather like never growing beyond the state of being newborn. God intends for us to grow spiritually throughout our lives, and as we grow, God summons us to offer what we now know of ourselves to what we now know of God, and new levels of obedience bring new levels of growth.

³ Also known as the Lake of Gennesaret or the Sea of Tiberias. It is approximately 13 miles long and 8 miles wide at the widest point; 682 feet below sea level.

⁴ It's interesting that these four always appear first in every list of the Twelve.

⁵ *The Perfect Storm* (Baltimore Pictures, 2000); directed by Wolfgang Peterson; based on the book by Sebastian Junger.

The Apostle Paul famously wrote that *“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. **For we are God’s handwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do**”* (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Having a “vocation” is not a matter of being a cabinet maker or a seamstress or a teacher or a lawyer. Having a “vocation” is not really a matter of “actualizing one’s potential” or of “doing one’s own thing” (though it does include an element of these). According to Paul, “having a vocation” has to do with “doing the thing that has been given to us to do.”⁶

So **how would you tell someone about what it is that God has “prepared in advance for you to do”?** *For what purpose were YOU created?* How does that eternal purpose relate to what you do “for a living”? How has that purpose changed as you have grown? What purpose is God working out in your life right now? These are crucial questions, because if you’re still breathing, God still has work for you to do.

My friend, Steve Hadden, once observed that the world is forever asking “What do you do?” but that this is the wrong question. Steve noted that the real question is **“What are you doing with your life?”** Most of us can’t answer that question. We really don’t *know* what we’re doing with our lives.⁷ Toyohiko Kagawa spoke for many when he wrote, “I read in a book that a man called Christ went about doing good. It is very disconcerting to me that I am so easily satisfied with *just going about.*”⁸

There are several definitions of “vocation” that continue to help me. Parker Palmer wrote that vocation is *“something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling.”*⁹ But my favorite definition of “vocation” comes from Frederick Buechner: *“Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. **The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.**”*¹⁰

It seems to me that our vocation in Christ is really less like a “plan” than a “posture.” Vocation has to do with an approach to life. Vocation has to do with an expectation that God is always at work and a curiosity about and an eager anticipation toward what spiritual adventure may come to us next.

William Alexander has suggested a fascinating way to address the question of vocation: If you were doomed to live the same life over and over again for eternity, would you choose the life you are living now? The question is interesting enough, but the point of asking it is really the unspoken, potentially devastating follow-up question. That is, **if the answer is no, then why are you living the life you are living now? Stop making excuses, and do something about it.**¹¹

⁶Beverly R. Gaventa, “The Scandal of Vocation,” *Christian Ministry*, 14 (July 1983), 33.

⁷Stephen L. Hadden, “A Vocation Clarification Seminar for College Students at Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Kentucky” (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), p. 12.

⁸Epigram attributed to Toyohiko Kagawa and cited by Donald R. Heiges, *The Christian’s Calling*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 25.

⁹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, quoted in Pemberton, 64.

¹⁰ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.

¹¹ William Alexander, *The \$64 Tomato* (Algonquin Books, 2007, p. 245.

A number of years ago, I heard Mary Cosby speak at Broadway Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, where Jill and I were members. Mary and her husband, Gordon, founded the famous Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., and what she said that night changed my life.

Mary was talking about this very question—about understanding what God’s will is and making the most of God-given opportunities—and she identified four signs that guide us to understanding the will of God for the next step of our faith journey. These signs have to do with the next step because we’re very seldom given guidance about anything beyond the very next step. The four signs are these:

1. The will of God for the next stage of the journey is **SIMPLE**. You could probably state it in one sentence.
2. The will of God for the next stage of the journey is **IMPOSSIBLE**. From where you are, you can see no way in the world to accomplish this mission.
3. The will of God for the next stage of the journey is **PERSISTENT**. It simply will not go away. No matter how much you try to ignore it, it comes back again and again, in your dreams, in your thoughts, always at the edge of consciousness.
4. The will of God for the next stage of the journey is **NOT AN EGO-TRIP** . . . but it will be a mission that will allow you to sense God’s pleasure and to enjoy God’s blessing as you experience the adventure of helping to complete God’s purposes for our time.

“I beg your pardon,” Bilbo asked. “I haven’t asked for anything!”

And Gandalf responds, “Yes, you have! Twice now. My pardon. I give it you. In fact I will go so far as to send you on this adventure. Very amusing for me, very good for you and profitable too, very likely, if you ever get over it.” That encounter reminds me of some other familiar ones:

- *The LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).*
- The very next day after Rebekah first met Abraham’s servant who had come from hundreds of miles away, her family called her and asked, “*Will you go with this man?*” And she responded, “*I will go*” (Genesis 24:58).
- After Isaiah’s overwhelming vision of God in the Temple, God asked, “*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*” And Isaiah answered, “*Here am I. Send me!*” (Isaiah 6:8).
- *The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:1-2).*
- When Paul encountered the radiant glory of the Risen Christ on his way to Damascus, he asked, “*Who are you, Lord?*” And the answer came, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do*” (Acts 9:5-6).

Now while you and I may not receive such summons and commissions as these, there’s no guarantee that we won’t, either. And so long as we follow Bilbo’s idea of insisting on staying close to home and on being home for supper, we’ll not have many adventures, and we’ll miss most of what God is doing in the world.

When all is said and done, perhaps Albert Schweitzer said it best:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “**Follow me!**” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey

Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as in ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.¹²

¹²Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd. ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1954), p. 401.