

Sermon by Rev. Marsh Luther Drege
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Epiphany 3
Mark 1:14-20
Immanuel Lutheran Church
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“I have decided to Follow Jesus”.... Has our Call to be disciples of Jesus been something that we decided on our own or something that chose us?

Many of you may remember the musical “Fiddler on the Roof.” Tevya is the patriarch of a Jewish household that is experiencing more than it’s share of life changes and upsets. Perhaps you remember Tevya’s prayer to God “ I know, I know, we are your chosen people- but couldn’t you choose somebody else”?

Decision? OR Being chosen? Perhaps you know the song- “I have decided to follow Jesus”? You won’t find it in our Lutheran hymnbook because...well, it isn’t particularly Lutheran. A decision is something we choose. Discernment is something that God chooses in collaboration with us. The story of today’s Gospel is a good example of how God chooses, we respond, and that is discernment. And that is discipleship

God chooses 2 sets of brothers in our text today for some pretty life-changing adventure. John the Gospel writer reminds us that discipleship isn’t something that we choose: “You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” (John 15:16). Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that discipleship and discernment aren’t some great achievement that we accomplish on our own, but is indeed a gift that God opens for each of us in our baptism. “Come Follow Me”!

I think of a man named Hans Luther, Martin’s father. He had dreams that his illustrious son’s practice of law would be the means of pulling their family up from their humble origins. Hans probably had dreams of his son standing before kings. And Martin did stand before kings- but it was as an outlaw, not a champion. Martin Luther didn’t decide to become a reformer. God chose. Martin responded and that is discernment, and that is discipleship.

I think of a man named Dietrich Boenhoeffer. I don’t think he initially decided to leave the comforts of academia here in New York and go back to face Hitler- a confrontation that eventually led to Bonhoeffer’s death. But again, God chose. Dietrich responded and that is discernment, and that is discipleship.

I think of a man named Martin Luther King, whose birthday we just celebrated. He also left the relative security of academia in Boston to return to his roots in the south- knowing that unlike the north, he would be required to sit at the back of the bus and use separate facilities from whites in the south. But God chose. Martin Luther King responded, and that is discernment and that is discipleship.

I think of woman named Mother Theresa who, again deliberately gave up a life of comfort and financial security to become a caretaker of the poorest of the poor. In her book "Come Be My Light" she writes about how the decision wasn't really hers. It was God's all along. God decided. Mother Theresa responded, and that is discernment and that is discipleship.

I think of a seafarer named Manuel. He told me about his call to the sea and how it was, as Fredreick Buechner describes vocation, a meeting of the world's deep need and his deep joy. Manuel loves the sea. He loves knowing that his job is to be part of an effort to make sure that people all over the world receive the goods that they need. He has said to me that he didn't choose the job- the job chose him. It's a tough job. It's hard work, long hours, there are pirates and choppy seas out there and he is away from his people and his homeland for months at a time. But as he says, "God doesn't leave me back home... God comes with me along the way." Again for this seafarer, God decided. Manual responded, and that is discernment and that is discipleship.

I think of the disciples in our Gospel text today who didn't so much decide to follow Jesus as they were compelled immediately to leave everything and follow. God decided. The disciples responded, and that is discernment and that is discipleship.

I think of how Seafarers and International House has responded to the Call of Jesus for almost 140 years- not so much deciding to care for the immigrant and the seafarer but being compelled by the obvious need- a need that very few others see. We "see" those who are in peril on the sea". We simply can't help ourselves knowing that there are thousands of seafarers and now asylum seekers who depend on our sacred hospitality: 7 port chaplains calling on over 1,600 ships and sharing ministry with over 16,000 seafarers a year in ports of New Haven, CT, Port Newark in New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Last year we housed over 30 new Americans who were released from detention centers awaiting being granted asylum. In each case and in each person's life we are compelled by the Call of Jesus to follow and to and fish for people. Again God decided. Seafarers and International House (with your support) has responded, and that is discernment and that is discipleship.

And I thank you, members of Immanuel, who are compelled to be disciples for the benefit of our seafarers and asylum seekers through your prayers, gifts of support and Christmas at Sea satchels.

The good news is this. God chooses us and we respond. Like Tevye we may occasionally ask God to choose someone else but the point is that God hasn't. God has chosen you. You. Me. You. To engage in the world, using our gifts, to fish for people, to discern that intersection where our deep joy meets the world's deep need. Like the point of Jesus on the cross in the first place- the intersection of deep joy and the world's deep need.

Let us pray: Lord God, you have called your servants to adventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.