



Roanoke, Virginia

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“The Call Before the Storm”

Mark 1:16-20

George C. Anderson

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

When the Lyons family led us in our *Affirmation of Faith* at Braeloch, it was a moment of calm. They voiced our desire to return to more **crowded** and **louder** times—to return to the noise and busyness of Picnic Sunday. But after voicing our desire to be at a **noisy** and **crowded** Braeloch again, the Lyons stepped out of the way so that we could see the serenity of the mountains and in a moment of quiet reflection, confess: “I lift my eyes to the hills from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.”

When Jesus encounters Simon and Andrew, and then James, John and Zebedee with their fishing crew on the shore of the *Sea of Galilee*, it is a moment of calm.

At least that is how I imagine it having been to the Sea of Galilee. I was able to visit the Holy Land thanks to a trip organized by Lil Brown—God bless her. Before the trip, I looked forward to seeing those *historical* sites; those places where you could say, “Oh, *that* happened here!”

- Masada, the fortification on top of a rock plateau, where 960 Jewish rebels (including women and children) held off a Roman legion of 15,000 for over two months;
- Excavated Roman cities like Caesarea Philippi;



- Jerusalem,
 - where empires ruled and then fell,
 - where temples were built and then destroyed,
 - where crowds demonstrated in public,
 - and subversive meetings were held in private; and
- Bethlehem where Jesus was born and Nazareth where Jesus grew up.

And I *did* love seeing those places. But what I loved most was the Sea of Galilee and the fields around it. After all, what *I* most wanted out of this trip to the Holy Land was to spend time with Jesus. It was in the countryside—not in churches, synagogues, museums and national parks—where it was easiest to imagine Jesus sitting *with me* as he did his disciples, sharing his wisdom on God’s will and talking to me about my purpose in the world. Yes, Jesus would later face crowds and chaos—even on those very fields and on that very Sea. And I knew that I would have to return from the Holy Land and get back into my busy life as a family member and the pastor of a church. But it was in the country where I most easily could imagine Jesus having time just for me.

Who knows what time of day it is when Jesus has his conversation with fishermen, but I can’t imagine it was in the heat of the day. I don’t want to imagine it being in the morning... but that might just be because as a son and as a father, I don’t want to think of James and John saying, “See ya!” to their dad and abandoning him to the day’s work. So, I imagine this scene in late afternoon. Simon and Andrew are casting their nets hoping for one last catch, and James and John are mending the damage done to their nets that day. It is quiet and, with the setting sun and the late afternoon breeze, it is cool. Perfect weather for a conversation.

I also like to think that Simon, Andrew, James and John will treasure the memory of this moment the rest of their lives. This is a rare moment when Jesus speaks directly to them,

- a moment when they feel his claim on them,
- a moment they find their life’s purpose;
- a moment that brings them into a movement.

They will remember this as their “*Call before the Storm*” moment.

For storms are coming.

- It won’t be long before word spreads about Jesus’ healings.
- It won’t be long before his reputation goes viral
 - and crowds are so big Jesus has to stand in a boat to teach them
 - and cross in a boat to the other side to get away from them
 - (which doesn’t work, by the way—they find him, and he can’t quiet his compassion and finds a way to feed them... all 5000 of them).

This is

- before Jesus preaches and teaches powerfully on behalf of the meek and the poor,
- before he has yet to face religious leaders who want to silence him
 - or political leaders who want him to disappear,



- before he offends almost every partisan faction in his world—
 - every special interest group by speaking truth that doesn't settle well with any of them,
- before he speaks truth to every imaginable power—
 - priests, lay leaders, zealots, friends, kings and governors.

This is long before that last week of Jesus' life

- when his reputation is attacked to delegitimize him,
- he is arrested without cause,
- he is brutalized while in custody,
- and is killed after political powers,
 - knowing he is innocent,
 - find it politically expedient to have him gone.

Storms are coming, but right now, calm; water lapping on the shore, a cool late afternoon breeze, and Jesus talking to four people about how they might want to live their lives.

I am going to use my imagination some more. Mark's Gospel summarizes the conversation Jesus has with the disciples in this way:

Jesus says, "Come follow,"
and four of them leave their nets and follow.

Since Mark didn't flesh the conversation out, I will. And since my mind can wander, sometimes it will sound like he is talking to them then and sometimes it will sound like he is talking to us now. But that's how it works with Holy Scripture rightly heard: *its world works its way into ours*.

"Look, storms are coming whether you follow me or not. You know that. You know how it gets with where you live and where you work: A parent gets sick, a child has trouble at school, a friend needs your help, a coworker is a thorn in your side, a pandemic shuts a city down, and then the city wakes back up with protests in the streets."

"Now, *if* you follow me, those storms are not going to go away. Some preachers might preach in my name and say that by following me you'll be safer, or richer—or by calling on me, you can avoid the worst that life can throw at you. But ignore their color commentary because in inviting you to follow me, I'm asking you to go where I go: where the sick need healing, sinners need forgiving, crowds need direction, into communities where most of the people do not look like or think like you—like in Samaria or Roanoke. You'll even end up in capital cities like Jerusalem or Richmond or Washington, DC because God's realm holds the world's realms accountable.

"What I'm trying to say is that God is in me so I have to stand with God, and to follow me is to stand with God, too, to have a moral compass where due north is radical love—radical love of God, radical love of God's world and radical love of all God's people living on it. That invites risk and sacrifice. And it will break your heart sometimes."

"But here's what's wonderful. You already matter so much to God—everyone does. But you're going to *know* God more because your heart will be with God's and it will break where



God’s heart breaks. And a heart that breaks open will let pain in, but also let joy come out. Such a life is a gift, don’t you think?”

Boy, in my imagination, Jesus is wordy, isn’t he?

Storms are raging in our world right now. You can hear the howling winds of a pandemic and the thunder of protest. But this worship service provides a moment of calm when we can look to the distant mountains and remember that our help comes in the name of the Lord—which is also to say through the ways of God. And two sacraments, a baptism and a meal, help us hear the “Call before the Storm.”

Rev. Link declared at Lacey’s baptism that she is a child of God, redeemed by Christ. Right now, Lacy is a small, adorable little girl. She will return home today to the nurture and care of a loving family that will protect her and will do things like turn the TV off when there are disturbing images on the screen. But that little girl will grow up, and the most important responsibility that her family has—and that we have as a church—is to prepare her to live as a follower of Jesus; become a witness in calm and in chaos to what is good and what is just. Trouble will come, but we want her to know that the best reason she’ll ever have to *get into trouble*, is when she gets there by following Jesus.

And we are about to share a meal together. Rev. Thompson Orfield will stand before us and one last time remind us that on a quiet night before a storm, the night before Jesus is arrested, he takes bread and breaks it, showing them *how fierce* is his and God’s love. He is willing to put his life on the line for the sake of this broken world that it might be healed and calls us to follow. For as often as we

- eat of this bread and drink of this cup,
- and go where God goes
 - and have our hearts broken where God’s heart breaks,

we make a witness to God’s realm until such a day when the lion lies with the lamb, enemies become friends, and there are no more divides of class and race among us.

Followers are called to that witness. We’ll need our strength, so let’s eat.

