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## **“THE MIRACLE OF DISCIPLESHIP”**

**A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard**

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**Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5; 4:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 62:5-12; Mark 1:14-20**

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Jesus had just come from the Jordan his hair was still wet from his baptism when he heard those powerful words from heaven; “This is my beloved in whom I am well pleased.” Then he goes to the Galilee and in the Galilee he delivers these words, “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand!” I like to think of this as the inaugural sermon in Mark’s Gospel.

It is amazing to me that this story is the Gospel Lesson for the Sunday which comes after the inauguration of President Barack Obama who proclaimed: “The time has come to remake our nation.” It sounds a little like Jesus saying: “The time is fulfilled.”

There are similarities but note the differences. A new day has dawned, a new regime has been ushered in with the preaching of Jesus. But, there is no great fan fair, no “Hail to the Chief”, and no inaugural balls.

We might imagine that when Jesus made this announcement it would have been at a great hall of justice like the Congress. There would be fireworks and much shouting. But no, that is not what the story says. The beginning of a revolution, a new movement which would later be described in the Book of Acts as, “turning the world upside down” begins with the proclamation of God’s reign.

So what happens after the inauguration? President Barack Obama called upon all of us to roll up our sleeves, whether we be Democrats or Republicans, whether we be young or old, to all get busy together to try and mend the brokenness in our economy, in our culture, in our world.

What did Jesus do? Two fishermen are working at their trade. They heard a man’s voice, “Follow me!” The text says, “immediately”, they dropped their

nets and followed. I am interested in that word “immediately” because I am not an “immediately” person. Some of you know, I am a procrastinator. I pray often to be forgiven for “those things left undone” that I was going to get around to doing.

Twice in this story there is a sense of urgency, immediately they leave their nets. Then it happened again, immediately, Jesus called to two other fishermen in their father’s boat: “Follow me,” he said to them and off they go. We don’t know whether or not they ever returned to fishing. But we do know in that decision, in that commitment, four men, Simon and Andrew, James and John changed the course of human history. They left what they were doing because they had been called. They followed and the Kingdom of God was underway.

That appears to me to be a strange way to begin a revolution. To call four fishermen, not by creating an army, not appoint special envoys, but to choose a group of untrained fisherman, and they go off stumbling after Jesus.

Most of us hear this story and start thinking about what we would have done, whether or not we would have left all to follow Jesus. If we got the call tomorrow afternoon while in line at the Food Lion or Harris Teeter, or sitting at home reading the paper, what would we do?

When we think about it this way the focus is on us. Am I really worthy to be a disciple? Am I good enough? Will I measure up? Look at the crew that Jesus calls to follow, four fishermen. The point of this story is, God does not choose us because we are worthy. God calls ordinary people, fisherman folks just like you and me.

If you really are a god, why would you choose amateurs to bring in your kingdom, to bring in your reign? Yet Jesus announces the coming of God’s Kingdom by calling ordinary people to be his disciples.

There is an important insight here. When God draws near, it happens most often not in the spectacular but in the ordinary. Robert McAfee Brown, a great American theologian in the last century, wrote: “There are little moments when vast things happen.” Little moments when we are called to serve in the line at the soup kitchen, or teach a Sunday school class, or sing in the choir, or to visit the sick or those in prison. You hear the call, “Come

and follow me,” and they left their nets immediately. This continues to happen my friends in the lives of folks like you and me.

In Jesus day, rabbis did not go out looking for disciples. In Jesus day you had to apply to be a disciple. You had to show your credentials. You were probably vetted. They would check you out to see if you measured up. Then the rabbi would choose the best and the brightest to follow him.

I find it strange that Jesus called these ordinary people and even more strange that they followed. In fact, this is the strangest point of all, they left what they were doing and followed him. Who in his or her right mind is going to leave what they are doing and follow a rabbi? Unless, unless God created in them the faith to follow.

Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest and teacher of preachers is right on target when she says this story should be called “the miracle by the lakeside.” The story we read this morning of those first disciples is not primarily their story or our story, your story and my story. It is not a story about our power to change our lives or make the courageous and important decisions, to do the noble thing. Or as my mother used to encourage me to do, “straighten up and fly right.” This is primarily a story about God. A God who has the power to create in the first disciple and in us faith where there is little or no faith which enables us to follow faithfully.

This is a miracle when we get up and follow, and it not only happened back then but it keeps on happening. Whenever you answer a call, whenever you respond and you wonder how that happened, we have the power by God’s grace and the presence of God’s Spirit to turn around and together to turn the world upside down to create a new future. God is the one who is always and everywhere present and always and everywhere calling us to new depths of faith and commitment. Therefore in any moment, in every moment, we need to be awake and alert, listening. Life is no empty void of meaning and purpose, because we have been called into a purpose given to us by God.

“And, immediately, they followed.”

But all of us do not follow immediately. Some of you might be a bit like me and slow to get it, or maybe you want to think about it, “I’ll get back to you later” as the old saying goes.

During the inauguration last Tuesday as many of us looked out on the Washington Mall and saw those two million people, we could faintly hear from history in the back ground the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King. Forty five years earlier he stood at the Lincoln Memorial sharing a dream. A dream that America could be a place where a person could be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin.

Martin Luther King is honored all over this nation now but it was not that way in the beginning. He was just a young pastor in Montgomery, Alabama. He was trying to learn what it was like to be a minister when a woman tired of the struggle, tired of the indignity, a woman named Rosa Parks said, “No, I am not going to the back of the bus.” And the Montgomery bus boycott began. They needed a leader and asked Martin Luther King, Jr. and he reluctantly accepted.

It was not long as he described in his writings that he received hate mail and death threats. He was worried about his own safety and the safety of his children. He was depressed and wondered why he had gotten into this. He couldn't sleep so he got up one night and went down to the kitchen and was sitting at the kitchen table when he heard a voice, clear as any voice he ever heard; “Martin, stand up for justice, stand up for the truth” and he said it sounded like the voice of Jesus, “And he promised to never leave me.”

“There are little moments when vast things happen.”

The Bible tells us not to hide our lamp under a bushel but every moment is filled with the possibility that when serving in the soup kitchen, or teaching, or singing in a choir, or visiting the elderly, God can work and move in your life and mine. Often it sneaks up on us, but remember it is the miracle of God's work among us.

This became clear to me in a story that Will Willimon the Dean at Duke Chapel for many years, tells. The Duke administration asked him to do a study on students life at Duke. He took this assignment very serious. He spent many evenings going to social events - riding around with campus police – interviewing and talking to people all over campus. He found some good things going on in student life at the university, but he also found much to worry about. His report was widely discussed, as some of you may remember.

A fraternity at Duke asked him to come and talk to them about his report. He had some critical things to say about fraternity life on campus. You may not be aware of this, but students often begin meetings at 9 or 10 pm. Ask Cherry Henry. Students are just coming alive at that time, when most of us are turning in.

Will knocked on the door and the president of the fraternity welcomed him. He noticed as he walked in there was a little boy with the fraternity guys. He was a little African American boy who couldn't have been over 10 years old. The young man who welcomed him said, "Dr. Willimon, they're waiting for you back there in the common room. Follow me, I'll take you there."

"I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When I finally finished my talk, I asked if they had any questions or comments. Dead silence. So, I thanked them for the honor, and made my way wearily out the door," Will says. "I noticed that the little boy climbed onto the lap of one of the brothers in the fraternity. I heard the fraternity member say to the little boy, 'You go on and get ready for bed. I'll be in to tuck you in and read you a story.' We stood just outside the door; the president thanked me for coming out. Let me ask you, I said, who was the kid there tonight?"

"Oh, that's Darrell," he said, "The fraternity has a service project in Durham, you know a type of Big Brother program. We met Darrell that way. His mom is on crack and having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't care for him. So she calls us up when she needs us. We go over, pick him up, and he stays with us until it's okay to go home. We take him to school, buy him clothes, books and stuff. I tell you what's amazing Dr. Willimon," the fraternity president said, "what's amazing is that God would pick guys like us to do something this good for somebody else."

It is amazing how God takes folks like you and me and does Kingdom work, visits the sick, builds homes for the homeless, teaches children of all ages, feeds the hungry.

It is the miracle of discipleship. Jesus said: "Come, follow me!" Amen.