

## January 24, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Mark 1:14–20](#)

TITLE: **Answering the Spoken Call**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

This is the third week of a sermon series on “new beginnings” and each week so far the events outside the church walls have had a big impact on what I’ve preached within these walls. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, there was the treasonous assault on our nation’s capital; the next Sunday I spoke about the first act of creation in which God pushed back the powers of chaos to carve out a place of life and order. The next week, we held our breath praying for a peaceful transition of presidential power and I spoke about the divine call coming to Samuel—that voice from God that stirs within us and calls us to a new way of life, a voice (as attested to by Martin Luther King, Jr.) that names divine dissatisfaction so we might evolve more fully into the ordained children of God. And here we are now, a few days into a new administration, wondering what the road ahead will look like, and we just heard the passage about Jesus’ spoken call to discipleship—saying “Follow me” to fishermen and to us. There is much to say about this theologically, but I want to start with a different approach and speak about it biologically.

Here on earth we are surrounded by an incredible diversity of animal and plant life; however, keeping track of all these creatures was difficult until Carolus Linnaeus developed a system of classification in 1758. We all learned in middle school science about Linnaeus’ system of kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species. It is so tidy. Every bird, beast, and bug was put into a neat box of scientific classification. Linnaeus thought of the world as a giant Garden of Eden, with all the flora and fauna put in place by God for our pleasure and use. He believed they reproduced just enough to replace those who died so that the entire ecosystem remained static—like an unchanging backdrop to the human drama on earth. A later scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, challenged Linnaeus’s tidy theory by insisting that animals move around, die off and struggle for existence. They are not static ornaments but active, migrating beings. In fact, a recent new study called the ICARUS project has placed tags on thousands of creatures—rhinos, blackbirds, bats, butterflies—and is now analyzing the ways they migrate over the face of the earth. God’s world is not a world at rest, but one in motion. That is an important theological insight we’ll return to in a moment.

Earlier I read from Mark chapter 1 the famous passage in which Jesus calls out to four Galilean fishermen saying “Follow me.” Jesus’ words are less of an invitation and more of a command. He doesn’t so much ask them to consider something (“Would you like to join me?”); he tells them to fall in behind him (“You there. Follow me.”) Jesus’ next phrase about becoming fishers of people is not a work order—a task to be completed; it is a new identity Jesus wants them to put on and live into. They wouldn’t be tied any longer to nets and boats but to Jesus—the teacher, rabbi, miracle worker, and (as they would come to discover) the Christ.

So let’s clear up something right from the beginning. The call to follow Jesus is not transactional; it is transformational. It is not something you do in order to earn your “get

into heaven” golden ticket. It is something you become—a new identity freely given to you, a robe of glory you put on, a spirit of hope you breathe into your lungs from that day forth. In the book of Colossians, the apostle Paul used this beautiful phrase: “Your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3b). We are hidden within his being, enfolded into Christ; and together we are now in God—in whom we live and move and have our being.

Now, is it possible to answer this call? Is it possible to change, to put on these garments of faith, to step into a new way of living and being? Of course! The ability to adapt and change is built into every one of us. It is part of human biological nature. We try new things. We change our minds. We improvise and adapt and learn how to go with the flow. It is part of the reason why all people are basically alike but everyone is still very different.<sup>1</sup>

So this very day Jesus comes to us, not offering a transaction but a transformation. He says, Get in line – follow me! I am the vine; you are the branches. I am the bread of life; taste and see and know that I am good. Stop doing that old work—fishing, filling, fussing around—and become fishers, disciples, embraced by me and hidden within me, so that from this time forth we will be together in God.

Now, in order to understand what the next step is, let’s combine the earlier biology lesson and the language of Mark 1. Linnaeus put all creatures into tidy, scientific boxes as well as in limited geographic locales. Species supposedly had their niches where God assigned them to stay and thrive.<sup>2</sup> But Humboldt and others insisted that animals are more mobile than that. They move, migrate, journeying incredible distances and in this way they adapt, evolve and thrive as part of God’s plan.

Now consider the way in which Jesus issued his call to discipleship long ago. Did he first build a huge temple to be his command center for ministry outreach? Did he build a palace fit for the king of kings, or become governor of a city from which his laws of life could be decreed? No. Jesus began his ministry with a recruitment speech spoken while he was moving around, traveling from Point A to Point B. Scripture literally says “Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee” when he called out to the first fishermen. Then it says, “He went a little farther” and called to James and John, sons of Zebedee. Jesus kept moving after that and he’s been moving ever since. There’s a reason Christians are called people of the way. We take in Christ and as transformed, forgiven, new creatures we step forward by faith, compelled to move by this Savior who refuses to sit still and calls us to new places.

Think of it this way. How many homes have you lived in so far? The census bureau estimates that a person in the United States may expect to move 10-11 times in their lifetime, with the majority of moves occurring before the age of 45. How many jobs have you had so far? Again, according to government statistics you might work in as many as 12 different jobs in a lifetime. We move around; we adapt; we migrate just like other species here on earth. That’s how God made us biologically and spiritually. And it’s in that movement that we are closest to Christ.

That is one reason why raising children in the church is so important. Children need to learn the ritual of worship, the melodies of hymns and choruses, the words of the Lord's Prayer, the experience of communion and prayer. Why? Because they will likely not always be here in Pittsburgh nor always able to come to ELPC. They will move and travel. They will take other jobs, explore other careers, experience new relationships and adapt over the course of their lives. There is little value in insisting you want to let your children decide about religion for themselves when they're older if you deprive them of the faith experiences necessary to make an informed decision. And in the same way, there's little value in professing that Jesus is someone we think about only one hour of one day a week, in a set location in a single language as part of a dominant culture. That's not the Jesus of the bible. Jesus is always on the move, active in a diverse, changing world and calling us to follow, adapt, grow, trust and believe.

One of the most poignant moments of Wednesday's inauguration ceremony was the recitation by the gifted young poet Amanda Gorman. The power in her words came from the calm, unflinching way she named the divisions and challenges before us even as she focused our attention on the horizon we hope to reach together. She spoke about not only seeing the light, but being the light that reflects our nation's highest ideals. An earlier poem of hers is titled [In This Place \(An American Lyric\)](#) and it concludes with these words:

*Hope—we must bestow it, like a wick in the poet, so it can grow, lit, bringing with it stories to rewrite...A history written that need not be repeated, a nation composed but not yet completed.*

*There's a poem in this place—a poet in every American—who sees that our poem penned doesn't mean our poem's end.*

*There's a place where this poem dwells—it is here, where we write an American lyric we are just beginning to tell.*

We are a nation—a church—poets who know that what has been penned does not mean our poem's end, and the lyrics of our faith are ones we are only just beginning to tell. So remember this: In the beginning, God pushed back the chaos and created a space for order and life and change. God calls to us—sometimes in our inner dissatisfactions with how things are, more often in our hopes for how things may be. And Christ still calls out for us to follow—to let our restless hearts find their rest in him—as we move forward together. Christ never leaves us as he finds us but guides us to where we need to be. For in Gorman's words, by grace we are composed but not yet completed. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Diana Ackerman, [The Natural History of Love](#), p. 152-3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sonia Shah, "Animal Planet," *New York Times Magazine*, January 17, 2021, pp. 42ff.