

“I Dare You to Follow Me”

Mark 1:14-20

Third Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 24) 2021

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*“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”*

- J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam

*“They knew who they had been, but not who they would become. They would find that out as they lived the rest of their lives.”*

- Alice Hoffman, *The World That We Knew*

*“When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid. The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light if only we’re brave enough to see it, if only we’re brave enough to be it.”*

- Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, Inaugural Poem

Congressman John Lewis wrote an essay shortly before his death on July 17, 2020, which the *New York Times* published the day of his funeral on July 30. He used the language of calling to describe his own journey and what ours must be. Lewis was 15 in 1955 when Emmett Till was murdered at age 14. Lewis wrote:

*Like so many young people today, I was searching for a way out, or some might say a way in, and then I heard the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on an*

*old radio. He was talking about the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence. He said we are all complicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not enough to say it will get better by and by. He said each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.*

*Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble... Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way...*

When John Lewis was four-years-old preaching to the chickens or when he was fifteen listening to Dr. King on the radio, he never dreamed he would become such an important and courageous leader of the Civil Rights Movement or that he would eventually become the conscience of Congress, while he served in the U.S. House of Representatives. Lewis never set out to do any of those things. He simply followed his calling. To use his words, he learned to “walk with the wind,” go wherever the Spirit of God blew.

How many of us could say something similar? Perhaps not in such dramatic ways as John Lewis, nevertheless, we have found ourselves saying things we never dreamed we’d be saying and finding ourselves in places we never dreamed we’d be called. We never dreamed of this pandemic and that the simple act of loving our neighbors by wearing a mask could be controversial. We never dreamed that we would need to be marching for Black Lives Matter in 2020 or witness an

insurrection at the United States Capitol in an attempt to block the results of a national presidential election. We never dreamed that we'd have to put signs up on all the entrances to our church saying that you cannot wear or bring guns inside this sacred place where we worship the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, because of a gun culture that has become a national addiction.

We never dreamed we'd be doing any of these things – and more. And we surely never dreamed we'd end up in Nacogdoches, Texas doing these things. All because we've been called.

When I was a boy and did something that I shouldn't have done, something that displeased an adult, that grown-up would often use a phrase that I suppose we take for granted its meaning. The grown-up would say, "Kyle, that was uncalled for!"

It's an interesting phrase, isn't it? "Uncalled for." As if there's someone out there calling for us. As if what it means to be good is not something that wells up automatically inside of you but is something that has to be summoned and called for from the outside, as if being the person you ought to be needs to be called for from the outside.

The older I get, the more I know that's true, that one of the deepest human hungers that we have is to be called for. And one of the deepest human fears that we have is that there is no one out there who cares enough about us to call for us.

Perhaps you remember the well-known scientist, Carl Sagan, who late in his life became interested in what was called the "search for extraterrestrial

intelligence.” Or we might say, the search for other beings out there in the universe who might be communicating with us. Radio telescopes were set up and they listened to radio waves throughout the universe to see if someone was trying to communicate with Earth. Someone said to Carl Sagan, “What if we never get any messages?”

“It’s a possibility,” he said, “but it’s a depressing thought to me that there might be no one in the universe trying to call us.”

Those of us in the Christian faith know that there is someone in the universe calling us, that God does not stand aloof from us and is not indifferent to us but communicates with us, summons us that we’re called for. Summons us to become who we are meant to be. Summons us to become involved in God’s work of making all things new. God is up to good trouble and God calls us to join and be a part.

There’s this wonderful story in the New Testament. It’s in the Gospel of Mark about two brothers, Peter and Andrew. There were fishermen and one day they were casting their nets and Jesus walked by on the shoreline. He saw them out there in the boat and he called them. “Follow me,” he said, “and I’ll make you fish for people.” And immediately they got out of the boat, left their nets there on the shore, and followed him. No questions asked. He didn’t say, “Now, here is the five-year plan I have for you.” He didn’t say, “I’ll make you successful.” He simply said, “Follow me.”

Then he went down the shoreline a little bit more and he saw two other brothers, James and John. They were in their boat mending their nets, and he said

to them the same thing: Follow me. And immediately they left their father, no questions asked, and followed him. So powerful in Jesus was this call of God, so hungry they were for someone to call for them that they stepped out of the boat and they followed.

Some New Testament scholars believe that all this happened at night, or in the early morning hours just before dawn, because in those days, fishermen fished during the night. So here is this God who knows us and cares about us enough to show up in the middle of darkness and summon us toward the light.

As Amanda Gorman told us this week at the Inauguration: *The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it.*

Notice, that Mark tells us that for all of those who were called, the call of Jesus involves leaving something behind. Simon Peter and Andrew leave their nets, their livelihood; James and John leave their father, which means not only leaving their livelihood but also means leaving their extended family and support system. We can't follow Jesus by dragging everything in our lives with us. Jesus comes along and says, "Come on follow me but you can't follow me by dragging your anger and fear with you. Leave your guilt behind. Leave your shame. Leave your Whiteness. In fact, to follow me means the rest of your life you'll be learning to leave things behind and learning to pick up new things."

Jesus says, "Leave behind what holds you captive. To follow me is liberating. Give up what you're addicted to. Be set free from the sin and death that enslaves you. Come and follow me."

But how do we know we're being called? How do we know how to hear it? How would you know how to recognize that God is calling you? Sometimes this call touches down deep inside of us in those secret places in our lives that give us the most joy. If we are honest with ourselves, there's some place in our life that gives us the greatest joy. Maybe it's that we're good at music and love it. Maybe we like to talk with other people. Maybe we like to work with children or youth. Maybe we like to teach or like to write or dance. Maybe we like books and research. Sometimes the call of God works as the Spirit stirs up our joy and passion in that secret place in our lives.

Frederick Buechner used to say, "Our calling is where our deepest gladness and the world's hunger meet." God gives us gifts and when we properly exercise those gifts, we experience great joy. God's whole plan for us is to exercise the gifts we've been given to serve. Where those two things come together is where Jesus stands and calls us to follow. Now we may end up doing any number of jobs in order to pay the bills. Those might be jobs which simply allow us to practice our calling of following Jesus after we get off from work. Others of us actually get to work at jobs which fit closely with our calling. Either way, the call is to follow Christ.

But sometimes, we are called in ways we never dreamed. Sometimes we're being called to places we never dreamed we'd go, to do things we never dreamed we'd do, to say things we never dreamed we'd say. Sometimes, perhaps most times, God calls us to follow into an unknown future. It's a risk. Scary. Who knows where we'll end up? Who knows what challenges are in front of us?

Perhaps the call of Christ is “Come on, follow me. I dare you. Who knows where you’ll end up if you stick with me? I dare you.”

Theologian David Ford says that one of the main works of the Holy Spirit is to “induce daring.” Christ dares us to follow him into the unknown future, but the Spirit is at work in our lives giving us courage to take the dare (from Will Willimon, *Preachers Dare*, endnotes 85, p. 143).

As many of you know, the Watson family travels back and forth to Auburn University to see middle daughter Drew compete in gymnastics. This is Drew’s senior year so they’re trying to go as often as possible. A couple of weeks ago I called Ron about something and he was on his way back from Auburn. I asked him, “Have you crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma?” He said, “Not on this trip. I’m further south. But I try to drive over that bridge every chance I get. Every time I cross it, it reminds me. It speaks to me. It always has such an impact on me.”

To use the language of this morning, Ron was saying that bridge calls me every time I drive over it.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge was named after a Confederate general who became the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan for the entire state of Alabama. It was no accident that this bridge was dedicated and named in 1940 to remind everyone of White Supremacy. And there is little doubt in my mind of the call of Christ on Sunday, March 7, 1965, when John Lewis and 600 nonviolent marchers marched across that bridge daring to risk their lives so Black Americans could have the right to vote. Attacked by the Alabama State Police and Sheriff Jim Clark,

John Lewis and others were beaten, teargassed, and nearly killed on national television. There is no doubt in my mind, that God dared to call John Lewis and the others to walk, to march, and to follow the Way of Jesus, and in so doing they transformed that symbol of White Supremacy into a symbol of freedom and justice. That's the paradoxical way of God. Even the darkness, even the symbol of hatred and White Supremacy cannot stop the call and work of God.

At the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday, President Obama said, "There are places and moments in America where this nation's destiny has been decided... Selma is such a place." He went on, "We know the march is not yet over. We know the race is not yet won..." (see Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin*, p. 191-192).

Jim Wallis and others who were there at the fiftieth anniversary asked this question: "What's the next bridge?"

What challenges are in front of us in the days to come? What are the next bridges?

Two or three years ago, Jane and I were reading our local newspaper and there was a photograph of some members of the high school choir who had received some sort of recognition. There was an Asian girl, a White girl, a Black girl, and a Latina girl. Jane looked at the photo and said, "Now there is one of the great strengths of our public schools."

But here is the thing. For many people in this country, those kids in that photograph are what they're afraid of.

We're in the process of fundamental change in our society. By 2045, the majority of U.S. citizens will come from Asian, African, and Latin American ancestors, according to U.S. Census Bureau projections. For the first time, in our history since 1776, the U.S. will no longer be a white majority nation. We will be a majority of minorities, with no one being in the majority.

That photograph from Nacogdoches high school is who we are and who we are becoming – multiracial, multicultural, and multinational. It is a great strength but there are White people in this country who are afraid. And because of their fear, there is increasing interest in private schools and charter schools. Furthermore, big corporations like Wal Mart are very much working the education market to get in on the charter school action.

One of the bridges in front of us is following the call of Christ into such a diverse world where there are also increasing amounts of fear and hatred. What does that mean for Austin Heights? What does it mean for how we do worship? What might it mean to be a witness of Christ right here in Nacogdoches where there is such amazing diversity but where there is also much White fear? How might we respond to Christ who says, "Come on, I dare you to follow me."

We have bridges in front of us on climate change, immigration, and the pandemic. We do not know when COVID-19 will end or if it will ever end completely. One thing we do know is that we're walking into a future that is unknown, and we need to be resilient, flexible, and quick on our feet.

Our own Jose Carbajal has taught me a lot about trauma work and therapy. For example, one insight of trauma therapy is to “talk while we walk.” That the parts of the brain dealing with trauma are best engaged when doing physical things like walking, exercising, or doing physical labor. Hence, talk while we walk. Theologically we call that “orthopraxy” – right doing, in contrast to “orthodoxy” – right belief. What’s best is to do orthopraxy and orthodoxy together. We learn while we’re doing. Talking and walking, walking and learning how to walk better go together.

In Mark, the disciples get up and follow, they go, and they learn faith and courage as they follow. Who knows where Jesus will take us? Who knows who we will become?

It takes enormous courage and a deep trust in the Holy Spirit to walk into such a future. Do you dare to do it?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.