

**Mark 1:14-20 – The perfect bait**  
**Epiphany 3, Year B – January 24, 2015**  
**Good News Lutheran Church, Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin**

I'm not sure if you've heard, but recently there's been some really good news for the Christian faith. The good news is that every major Christian denomination is shrinking, that our world is becoming increasingly secular and hostile to religion, and finally that all over the world, Christians are facing intensifying persecution for their faith up to and including death.

Perhaps you were already aware of one or all of those things. You probably haven't thought of any of them as particularly good news. While that may be up for debate, at least one positive effect from things I just mentioned has been observed. It's the elimination of what some people call the large squishy middle of Christianity. You see, for years was always a significant portion of the American population that considered themselves Christians. But in terms of the impact that had on what they believed and how they lived, it didn't mean a whole lot. The Bible has a term for these people too. It calls them lukewarm Christians. Not hot, not cold, lukewarm. The squishy middle of Christianity.

But now that our society is becoming increasingly secular and hostile toward religion, that middle is being eliminated. For sure, some are walking away from their faith completely. But plenty of others are recommitting and once again taking seriously the faith they've always claimed.

And looking at it objectively, I think we'd agree that's good news. Except for the fact that that squishy middle of Christianity is often exactly where we want to be. The middle is where you can come to church on Sundays and then do whatever you want for the rest of the week. The middle is where you can be a Christian without anything in your life needing to change. The middle is where you can be a Christian without anyone else needing to know. The middle is safe. The middle is easy. The middle seems pretty nice doesn't it?

Well, as we take a look at the verses in front of us today, we'll see that Jesus has made it his mission to rescue us from that middle. Well, maybe rescue isn't the right word. Rescue makes us picture someone who's drowning, who's frantically waving for a lifeboat, who will gladly grab onto a life preserver. These verses tell us that Jesus fishes us out of that middle. In other words, like fish, we're happy in the water. We're at home in the water. It's difficult for us to think that anything can be better than the water. So as you can imagine, if Jesus makes it his mission to fish us out of the place where we want to be, and pull us up into the place where he wants us to be, he's going to need the perfect bait.

We'll get to that bait in a minute. But first, I wanted to show you what it looks like when Jesus goes fishing. In these verses we meet two sets of brothers. Peter and Andrew. James and John. Now, realize that these men had already met Jesus. They already knew him and believed that he was the promised Messiah. But as of yet, it hadn't changed all that much for them. They were out on the sea of Galilee, doing exactly what they had been doing before they met Jesus: fishing.

But then Jesus walks up to the shore and calls out, **“Come, follow me.”** That’s no small request. You see, it forced these men to just walk away from some pretty substantial things. Their business, their livelihood, their homes, their families, their familiar way of life.

It would also force these men to walk toward some potentially scary things. Mark tells us that all this took place, **“After John was put in prison.”** John the Baptist was the one who went out in advance of Jesus to prepare people for him and point people toward him. These men had heard John’s preaching and had listened to him. They had also seen where John’s preaching had landed him. In prison. So now Jesus comes along preaching exactly the same message. They were well aware that there was a pretty good chance that could lead him and his followers to the very same place it led John. Maybe even worse.

And here’s the kicker. Not only was Jesus fishing for these four, not only did he want them to follow him. He wanted them to turn around and convince others to do the same. He said, **“I will make you fishers of men.”**

Friends, when Jesus goes fishing, when he asks you to follow him, he’s asking you to be willing to walk away from some pretty substantial things. And he’s asking you to be willing to walk toward some potentially scary things.

You see, if it were up to us, we’d say, Sure I’ll be a Christian. As long as it doesn’t take too much of my time. As long as when I’ve had an exhausting week, I can still sleep in on Sundays. Or as long as I don’t have to cut back on the hours I spend eye guzzling my favorite show on Netflix to lead my family in devotion and prayer. Sure, I’ll be a Christian as long as I can still spend my money the way I want. As long as I can still get the car I want. As long as I can go some place warm at least once every winter. As long as I can afford all the leagues and camps and private lessons for my kids. Sure, I’ll be a Christian as long as I can still sit around with my friends and gossip the way we like to do. As long as I can still watch the movies and visit the websites I like. Sure, I’ll be a Christian as long as I don’t have to face scrutiny or ridicule for it.

The middle is exactly where we want to be. The middle is exactly where we’d prefer to stay. But Jesus won’t allow that. He calls you to be willing to walk away from some pretty substantial things. He calls you to be willing to walk toward some potentially scary things. And then, if by some miracle he can talk us into it, he then tells us to turn around and convince others to do the same.

That’s what it looks like when Jesus goes fishing. It’s no wonder the Bible compares it to fishing in the first place. It’s really not all that different from convincing a fish that he’d be better off in the boat than he is in the water. So if Jesus can pull it off, as he did with these four men, he must be using some bait.

Mark introduces this entire section by telling us what that bait is. He tells us that Jesus went into the region of Galilee proclaiming, **“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and take my good advice.”** That’s not what it says, is it? But it’s easy to think that’s what Christianity is. Good advice. Good advice on how to think, on how to talk, on how to act. And if we’re good Christians, we’ll take that advice and follow that advice as best we can.

Only Jesus didn't say, "**Repent and take my good advice.**" He said, "**Repent and believe the good news.**" The very essence of Christianity, the bait that Jesus wants us to sink our teeth into is good news. It's an announcement about something that happened. That God himself did. That God himself entered our world, lived as one of us, and died in place of us. It's the news that heaven doesn't need to be earned but rather is a free gift from God. It's information that needs to be believed rather than advice that needs to be adhered to.

Here's why that matters when it comes to Jesus fishing for followers. Imagine getting some good financial advice. Someone says, You know, because of the power of compound interest, if you save 10% of your pre-tax income for retirement, you'll retire early and comfortably. Everyone would agree that's good advice. So why don't so many people do it? Well, they find out that saving 10% means that I can't have an unlimited data plan, I can't afford DirecTV, and I can't go on vacation every year. When it requires us to make sacrifices, even the best of advice isn't followed.

Here's why else it matters. When we're put in a position to turn around and share good advice with others, we hedge our bets. We say things like, "Here's what works for me." Do you want to get into shape like I did? Well, I do cardio three days a week, lift weights two days a week. I have whole grain oatmeal for breakfast, a protein shake at lunch, and a sensible meal for dinner. That works for me. In other words, something else might work for you. Just because one thing is good advice doesn't mean something else can't be.

That's why it's so important that Christianity isn't good advice. It's good news. It's not about what you should do. It's about what someone else did for you. Realizing that is the only thing that can cause us to say, You know what, whatever substantial thing I might have to walk away from, whatever scary thing I might have to walk toward, I'm in. All in. Realizing that is the only thing that can cause us to look at someone we know and love and say, You know what, this isn't just what works for me. This is what you need to know and believe if you and I are going to get to hang out in heaven someday.

In fact, would you believe me if I told you that when it comes to doing this fishing, you and I actually have it easier than Jesus did? That if he could convince people to follow him, you and I should have no problem? Think about it. For starters, this good news was all about him. He came saying, Guess what? Everything you've been waiting for. Your only hope for life and eternity. Dah dah dah daaaahhh. Here I am. It's no wonder so many thought he was crazy. You and I don't have to point to ourselves, we point people to someone else. Secondly, Jesus was fishing for followers before the good news was even really news. When he called these four men, it was still three years before the front page of the Jerusalem Daily Times would say: Dead man rises from the grave. By the time these four turned around and started fishing themselves, all of the news was actually news. It had actually happened. All they had to do – all we have to do – is point to events that have actually happened.

Friends, I don't know what's going to happen with that squishy middle of Christianity. I don't know how it compares with what it was two decades ago or what it will be two decades from now. But I do know this: Jesus doesn't want you to be there. He wants to fish you right out of there. And when he goes fishing – when we go fishing, the bait, the perfect bait, the only bait that will work is the good news of what he has done for us. In fact, if you're looking for good news for the Christian faith, there it is. Christianity's really good news is nothing more than the fact that Christianity is really good news. Amen.