A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Immediate Call, Immediate Response*

Matthew 4.12-23

January 26, 2020

Immediately. Immediately. The disciples left their nets, left their boats, left their fathers and followed Jesus. To be more precise, it wasn’t actually disciples-yet who left their nets. They were fishermen, young men doing the work of their fathers and their fathers before them, doing good, I think honest, labor. They became disciples by following Jesus. If you’re already a disciple, maybe you are already the kind of person who would follow him wherever he leads. “Wherever he leads I’ll go” Christians sing. But if you’re a fisherman, or fisherwoman, or an accountant, or an actress, or a teacher, or an electrician, or a parent, and Jesus calls, do you immediately drop what you’re doing to follow him? They did.

 Immediately. And I’m really stupefied by that. Humbled by it too.

I know what immediately means. I even know what the Greek word means. It means immediately, straightaway, right now. In a lot of ways, I’m a big fan of immediately. It’s what I want the traffic light to do when it turns red and I’m in a hurry. It’s what I want road construction crews to do to fix the highways and the potholes on my street. Immediately. Right now. It’s how I want my online order delivered and how I want my drive through bag of grub handed to me. Right now.

And, you know, for a large part the world is working hard to give me what I want, when I want it. We wring our hands that we live in such a fast-paced world until the world’s not moving fast enough. Then we get frustrated and complain. Recently I installed a reading light over a sofa in our den. But I cut the hole in the wall too high to reach from a seated position on the sofa which happens to be where you are when you decide you need a reading light. Really it was bad. The knob couldn’t be reached unless you stood, leaned over the sofa, and stretched way up. It drove me crazy and took so long to turn on the light! But I solved that problem. I got a magic lightbulb. And so now with the magic light, seated comfortably on the sofa with the book still in your lap and the coffee in your hand, you say “turn on the reading light” then there is light! If you say “turn off the reading light” it turns off. We live in an amazing world. Even better, I gave it to Jenny as a Christmas present, so I solved two problems in one. Brilliant! In every sense of the word!

I think we all know what it’s like to want something to happen right now, and it does. And I think we know what it’s like to want something to happen right now, and it doesn’t. But those are things outside of me happening to me. What about my own soul’s movement and what happens in me? This story isn’t about making fishermen into fast food fishermen, this is about making fishermen into fishers of people.

When it comes to big things in life, I’m not an immediate kind of person. I’m more of a deliberate kind of person. When I first thought I was ready to become a Christian when I was 10 years old, I talked with my parents and then set up a meeting with the pastor. I prayed with him and then sometime later went up the aisle in front of the church to make a profession of faith, and then waited several weeks until I was baptized. Salvation may come in an instant, but faith being actualized in my life was a process. It was not immediate. So was going into the ministry. It was about 4 years from the time I first felt the pull to vocational ministry as I tested that calling, explored it, and then committed to it. It was another 2 years before going into seminary. And then another year before I was behind my first pulpit. It was not immediate. When I fell in love with Jenny I . . .well, that was a little quicker. But usually I’m pretty deliberate.

The contrast in personalities between deliberate and immediate is front and center in the opening moments of the movie 1917. No spoilers here. Lance Corporals Will Schofield and Tom Blake are commissioned to hand deliver a message to another battalion commander miles away. They understand immediately what’s at stake. They are to go right out into and cross through the hellscape of no man’s land, right into the German trench, which supposedly has been vacated, but who really knows, and then make their way across the French war-scarred countryside to stop an advance right into a trap. Lives are at stake in accomplishing their mission, but so are theirs-- from the first moment they leave the trench.

Upon receiving this order, Schofield with determination almost frantically races down the trench to the exit point. No time to waste. Blake is more reluctant, more rational. “Wait,” he keeps saying a step behind. “Wait. We need to think this through. We just need to talk about it!” Deliberate. “There’s nothing to talk about. We have to go now.” replies Schofield. Immediate.

What Simon and Andrew, James and John did in their immediate response is downright heroic, even more so because they did it . . .immediately, according to Matthew’s gospel. Readers like us, especially those who trend more deliberate, fill in the narrative gap with imagination about what might have prepared them to make what appears to be a snap decision. John’s gospel has a different story about how they met Jesus earlier on, so maybe that was it. Maybe they had seen Jesus around preaching and were eager to follow if given an opportunity. Maybe they were unhappy as fishermen and were looking for an opportunity to go their own way. Maybe they didn’t like working with Dad. We can fill in all kinds of scenarios that would help explain the decision they made. We know people’s minds and hearts work like this. Snap decisions are rarely truly snap decisions. What looks like a snap decision, a gut instinct, an impulsive act almost always comes from something within us that has prepared us for the moment when we act. It’s natural to fill in the blanks behind this story. Yet when we do that, we run the risk of robbing the power of their response. We are looking for all the ways their response is mediated by their circumstances or their psychologies or their relationships. Matthew doesn’t give us any of that. He emphasizes it was unmediated response. Im-mediately, they dropped what they were doing and followed Jesus only on the promise of being made fishers of people.

Now, see, sometimes, I want to be that kind of person. Don’t you? The kind of person whose faith is ready to go when the moment comes, when Jesus calls. A missionary once told me that he thinks Christians are unfaithful unless you have a valid passport and a packed suitcase in the hallway closet. If you don’t, he said, you’re not ready to respond to the call when it comes. It’s a powerful point even if even in the scriptures not everyone comes to Jesus so instantly. The Pharisee Nicodemus wanted to discuss all of this over with Jesus late at night. He wasn’t ready to pack his spiritual bags to go with Jesus just yet. Even Apostle Paul, whose road to Damascus conversion is the model for mystical experiences, even Paul fought hard against the way of Jesus for a long time. God asked him, “Why are you kicking against the goads? Why are you resisting me?” An Ethiopian eunuch sat with Phillip for a Bible study before deciding he too would like to be baptized. What’s keeping me he asked? Nothing, Phillip responded and he baptized him. The rich young ruler decided way too much was keeping him from following Jesus, and he turned away. Did he ever come back? Not every call story has a happy conversion ending.

Yet men and women became followers of Jesus, often leaving behind everything they knew, or at least having everything they knew transformed by their relationship with him. Since then many have faithfully followed him often in surprising ways. Famously, Augustine was just knocking around stealing pears and whatnot when he heard a child singing “Take and read, take and read.” He thought that little song was for him, and he picked up the scripture and let it fall open. He read that section on which his eyes fell, Romans 13.13: Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to satisfy its desires.” That was it. Augustine said, “No further would I read; nor needed I: for *instantly* at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.” It changed his life. God has a way of getting ahold of people who are ready to listen and respond.

What more do you need to follow Jesus’ lead?

Like Nicodemus, do you need to talk this out and believe that you, too can be born again?

Like the Ethiopian, do you need a guide to help understand what you are reading in scripture?

Like Paul, do you need to be knocked off your high horse?

Like Augustine, do you need to deal with shame and guilt that you are too unworthy for God’s grace?

Like Mary Magdalene, do you just need to hear your name called?

There’s a call on your life. The call of Jesus is the call to be transformed in every possible way in the way of Jesus. It begins with who you are.

For the four young fishermen of Galilee, it was famously their nets they dropped and their boats they left. For any of us, what is it you need to let fall away? Some shame? Some insecurity? Or fear? For many people, what is dropped is just the illusion of security that surrounds the status quo of their lives. The four fishermen powerfully model to us: answering the call right here, right now. Because it wasn’t just a net or boat, it was everything they knew.

What more do you need to follow Jesus Christ? If this sounds like an evangelistic sermon, it is. Evangelism is sharing good news. And this is good news, invitation to walk in the newness of life in Christ. What more do you need to hear and receive this good news? Of course, we ministers and church folks would love to meet that need, to provide whatever answers or opportunities or nudge you need. Churches exist for that purpose, to help one another with what we need to commit our lives to him in faith, in baptism, in discipleship. But the word ‘immediate’ still stands there as a beacon to all of us. Un-mediated call. Un-mediated response.

We believe what the church offers . . . its practices, sacred spaces, studies and fellowships, its opportunities to serve and love the world, its smells and bells and songs and sermons . . .we believe all the church offers is good. We also believe God is here transcending our best efforts and, thankfully, our clumsiest failures. God is here. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s presence in Christ is here with us, with you. When we use words like spiritual, sacrament, participation, prayer, mystery . . .we’re grasping at ways to say what we believe: God is here and is calling to you. We have a song like that “Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, Calling to you and to me . . .” I don’t know about the softly and tenderly part all the time, but the other part is right on. Jesus is calling to you and to me. The most important decision any of us makes is to respond to the call, and respond over and over again--to follow him. Trust him for each step of the way ahead of you and he will be faithful to be with you and lead you into mystical bliss and through dark, lonely valleys. I am with you, he promises, I am with you even to the end of the age.

The question posed by the story stands at the door of our hearts and knocks, knocks, knocks--asking, friend, beloved child of God: what are you waiting for? What more do you need? I am here. Come, follow me.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2020