

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Annual Meeting Sunday 2020  
The Rev. Christopher McLaren, Rector  
January 26, 2020  
Matthew 4:12-23 Calling of Andrew and Simon – Calling of us into something new  
Theme: An Adventurous Possibility

### **Calling Story**

When I saw the passage for today, I had to smile as it is a passage that has had a rich history in my life. Today is the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood and this passage played an interesting role in my discernment.

One night I was saying my evening prayers, chanting the psalms with candles burning and looking at a painting of “The Calling of Simon and Andrew by the Sea.” It was a reproduction of a painting by Duccio the Italian Master. Some of you know that I was an Art History student so I enjoyed the way art could speak in ways beyond words. It was simple almost like an icon, Jesus on the shore beckoning to Andrew and Simon who were in their boat holding their nets. The scene was reduced down to a very few elements, Jesus, water, craggy mountains behind and two fishermen in their boat holding their nets.

Those of you who know me, probably know that I'm not a particularly mystical person but that night something happened. I began to be drawn into the scene of the painting, intensely focused. I picked it up and found myself peering into the scene of Jesus interrupting the fishing efforts of two ordinary people minding their own business. To this day I can only sort of explain it, I heard a voice speaking to me, now whether it was audible or not I cannot say but it said simply, Christopher I'm calling you to be my priest. That was it, the sum total of the message, but it was a kind of answer to a question I had been pondering for some time and struggling with.

Then two things happened in short succession that freaked me out. One was that at the café I managed I had sat down for a quick lunch at a hidden corner table to be alone and rest. I got up to get a drink and when I came back, a man I knew a little about was sitting at the table as well. I groaned inwardly, no quiet, no real break. But as we talked something happened that I did not expect. He looked at me across the table and said, I'm not an Episcopalian and I've never said anything like this to someone before but, “I think God is calling you to be an Episcopal Priest.” I sat there stunned that this message was coming to me from someone I hardly knew. It was uncanny and I pondered it in my heart.

The next day at my home church, St. Timothy's I had another encounter. As I was walking into church a woman, Johanna, who had been an InterVarsity staff worker in campus ministry, stopped me at the door and began talking with me. Johanna was someone I trusted deeply and admired. As we were talking, she looked intently at me and gave me a message, she said. “Christopher, I had a very strange dream last

night and I need to tell you about. It was a dream about scripture. It was a scene from the gospels, Jesus' calling of Andrew and Simon. In it a friend of ours Chess Trethewey was on the shore of the lake and it was clearly Chess but he was also somehow Jesus, you and I were in a boat holding fishing nets. And Chess was saying to you, I want you to be my minister. It was weird and hilarious but also powerful. I'm not sure but I think that God is calling you into the priesthood Christopher. Does this make any sense to you? I was ruined, dumbfounded and burst into tears. Three strange mystical moments in the life of a practical young man had reduced me to a sobbing amazement. The message had been delivered in an inescapable way.

My life was being upended, changed in ways I could not comprehend and I was scared and joyful all at the same time.

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### **A Changed Life**

The other night we were watching Anne with an E and in the episode Anne's best friend Diana, has an unexpected and challenging conversation with her great aunt, Josephine about not just going to finishing school as her parents want her to but rather taking the Queen's college entrance exams and making something interesting of herself by going to University. Diana decides to take the exam and reflects upon it, "Isn't life momentous, you can wake up in the morning and everything is as it usually is and something can happen during the day an experience or decision that can change everything, can change the course of your life."

That is what this passage of Jesus' calling Andrew and Simon is about. It is about something happening that changes your life. It is about an encounter with Jesus that shifts things within you so that you are never quite the same again. It is about Jesus bringing newness into your life, shattering your status quo and inviting you into the adventure of following the beautiful way that this beautiful man embodies and demonstrates.

### **Discipleship**

I know that I've said it before, but a disciple is simply a fascinated person who desires to know and do what they see in another person. In our context it is becoming fascinated with Jesus or becoming fascinated with one of the saints of God who lights up the way or a saint sitting beside us in the pew who demonstrates something of the love of God in such a way that we find ourselves wanting to know them, to know how they think, what drives them, what has shaped them into the person of God they have become because we too want to be God's person in the world. We want to radiate the light of Christ into the world, we want to be a person alive with the fire of God's love. That is what a disciple is, that is what we are all called to become.

### **Loneliness in America**

This past week a new report on Loneliness in America was released. It was a shocking and sobering report. What they learned was that loneliness is endemic in

our culture, 2/3 of Americans report that they are lonely an almost 18% rise since 2018. Loneliness can be as damaging to one's physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day a US health report suggested. The report said that loneliness is worse among men than women. Surprisingly it found that loneliness is the worst among the youngest surveyed those in their 20's and 30's. It tells us that social media and addiction to our devices is making us lonelier and lonelier. The study said that work connections and relationships at work can really help people especially if they are supportive and caring. While I have not read the entire report, it made it clear that what really matters is the personal connections one has. No amount of texting or social media or YouTube video channels will push back the loneliness. We need each other. We are made for human connection and so many people in our world are not sure where to find it.

### **Made for Community**

As a preacher of the Gospel this seems like low hanging fruit to me. We are made for community. We are made to be connected to others and to create networks of relationship and loving care around us. People thrive when they are loved and supported, find acceptance, companionship and compassion, as well as accountability, challenge and learning.

Humm... That sounds a lot like what the church intends to be, this sounds like what we desire for the community of St. Mark's: A place where relationships are important and cultivated, A place of acceptance and welcome of All who come through our doors, even the challenging people who are not like us, A place of inquiry and discussion where one doesn't have to check their brain at the door. A place where people of all ages are respected and enjoyed and honored. A place where people pull together with their energy, skills, and financial resources to make community life possible and sustainable and capable of reaching out beyond itself. Wow! I want to be a part of a place like that! Oh, I am, and so are you.

### **Why Do We Come to Church?**

I suppose that we all have our various reasons for participating in church don't we. I believe that it is primarily about finding a connection with God, that is what we longing but there are other reasons as well:

Fellowship – People love the sense of community and connection

Prayer – We want to have a place to pray, some quiet, some time to reflect and think

Comfort – The liturgy and our worship can be a deep comfort.

Tradition – The tradition can ground us as the world changes so rapidly the

Eucharist stays put and is dependable.

Personal Growth- Many of us are looking for a changed life – Most of us want to grow and become who God desires for us to be more loving, more compassionate more forgiving more generous, more self-giving

### **Here are some interesting reasons that have been shared with me:**

“This place saved my life,” One person told me simply

“I never thought that I would be comfortable in church again and then I found this amazing place where I can sink my roots down deep and grow as a Christian again.”

“My parents drag me here” – Well it’s a reason to come to church and I respect this reason. We don’t always know what we need until we need it and having spiritual depth and resources when you need them is a gift that your parents may have given you.

“I come to support my spouse” – This is a really cool move that sometimes bares unexpected fruit.

“I love the music” – I know this is one of my reasons, I love to sing. It cheers my heart, soothes my soul and the choir is looking for you.

“It’s the only time during the week where I seem to be able to pray and just sit and commune with God.”

“I want to be around other like-minded people – we need help reinforcing our values within ourselves and within our children. We are not alone in this work.”

“This church doesn’t make me angry well not very often anyway.”

“I like that we can laugh at church and then be intensely serious too.” - Church is meant to feed us deeply through our whole life.

“I crave silence and so I come and sit here during the week and pray.”

“I’m lonely and church helps to push back on that darkness in my life. I love the sense of community.”

“I love hearing the children sing and now I love learning the songs they are teaching us, when you think about it, they are leading worship, leading us in song and that is amazing. It’s not a performance its worship.”

“I think I come to church because I am hungry. Church is about feeding my soul and I think if we are honest most of us are really, really hungry. I know I am.”

“I have a yearning within me and the only place that seems to help me with that is worship, this prayer soaked real estate soothes my longing in a way I can’t really describe.”

“I refuse to go to a church where afterwards I have to tell my kids, I know that is what they said but we don’t believe that or that is not the way we think about that. I don’t want to have to undo church at home.”

I think you get the point and you probably have something to add to this list of why you come to church or what makes this community of faith important to you. In fact, I have a little challenge to deliver to each of you: take a little time to think about your list of why you have made St Mark's your spiritual home and dare to write it down and share it with me or have a one on one conversation and share it with another person in this community that you'd like to connect with over the next two weeks.

St. Mark's is a remarkable church by which I mean a gathering of people on the journey into faith. We are a thriving community for so many reasons. We are a place where things are pretty dynamic and changing yet our Sunday worship is firmly rooted in the Book of Common Prayer, its dependable and deep.

### **A More Adventurousome Possibility**

St. Mark's is a place where you can change and grow. St. Mark's is a place where you will be stretched and offered ample opportunities to try new things. And that is part of what the faith journey is about. Andrew and Simon were minding their own business fishing and Jesus approached them with a new possibility. One condition of following Jesus is leaving their nets and boats (their known work) and family so change is built into discipleship. What I have found in the Christian journey is that Jesus is always inviting us to turn away from a current preoccupation and to entertain a **more adventuresome possibility**. Jesus is always calling us into a deeper dimension of life and being in a community can often help us to embrace this deeper way. This is our job for one another, to help each other change and grow into more faithful followers of Jesus. To help each other become fascinated by the ways of Christ.

### **Change and Growth**

I think that one of the difficult challenges at St. Mark's is to embrace and accept the changes that are happening in a dynamic and growing congregation. Things don't all stay the same around here and that can be challenging. It can be experienced as loss and sometimes that brings grief over something you liked or expected to stay the same. And believe me people's complaints and concerns about change are real and I hear them not always directly but I hear them. I can say, "This is not the same church that I came to over 8 years ago." It has changed so much I am sometimes amazed and overwhelmed myself. But at the same time, I'm grateful that this is a growing and vital church willing to try new things, able to integrate new members into its ministry and alive to the future. For many of us Thriving as a church is a new experience and we have worked hard to get here and we've been blessed in the process but I know that for some that is challenging and difficult and has meant that things are not like they were when it was small and you knew everyone or there was less going on and you could do everything. Like Andrew, we are being called into a **more adventuresome possibility** and it is both scary and exciting. And it is ok to feel those feelings and to talk about them. It is ok to be honest about what you miss or what you are most excited about in the coming year. It's ok to talk about why you

come to church, what makes this place special to you and what you'd like to see happen or be part of making happen in this place. It is ok to love the "good old days" and "to be excited about imagining new ministries and new possibilities." That is what the adventure of faith demands of each of us.

But there are things that are not going to change if they are in my power and your power to hold fast to them.

### **A Relational Church**

Our deep commitment to a relational church where people are more valuable than programs is not going to change. We had a wonderful summer of conversation this past year with more than 250+ conversations happening that continue to create a thick network of relationships that matter. We want to be a church not of anonymous worshipers but of people who work to know each other and be known and thus can care and love and help one another to discover their belovedness in God.

### **Powerful Worship and Life-Long Learning**

Our focus on powerful worship that is connected to our everyday lives and our commitment to life-long learning and formation in our faith is not going to change. Worship is at the center of everything we do and we want everyone involved in that shared work and joy – there are so many ways that you and our children can help make worship beautiful and joyful and meaningful and deep. We understand the Christian life as a long-obedience in the same direction and to that end we are called to be life-long learners in the faith, reading actively about the Christian life and participating in the classes and discussion and formation experiences that happen here each week. Each of us are on a journey into ever-deepening and loving relationship with God and we want to support and encourage one another.

### **To Love and Serve**

In the ordination vows it says, "You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor." It is my joy and honor to be a priest to everyone in this congregation young or old. And I want to make it clear that we are committed each day to ministering to the whole congregation. St. Mark's is blessed to have families and children in abundance and to have our Montessori school. Having all the generations present in this place is a deep grace and one that we should take delight in. We are blessed to have such talented people both lay and clergy to minister to and with and alongside our young people discovering God at work within themselves along the way. If you have ever been part of church that had few or no children worshiping there, you know what a blessing it is to have youth among us and with us and part of us. We are also daily involved in caring for our elderly members: visiting in the hospital and rehab centers, taking communion to those who are unable to attend worship, calling those whom we haven't seen in a while and much more. This past year we saw the end of a ministry called Celebrities that was a luncheon that served the older members of the parish for more than 25 years. It was a wonderful ministry but as with all ministries

it had a life-span and those who were faithfully making it happen found that their energy and available time for this ministry meant that it was time for this ministry to end. While that was met with some sadness and a sense of loss by the dozen or so people who actually attended the luncheon, we hope that it is also opening up an opportunity for us to reimagine our ministry here with our seniors and retirees. We are looking forward to seeing new ministries begin as new leadership and vision emerges. On the first Thursday of February we will be hosting a luncheon and discussion about where ministry with our older members and retirees can develop and grow. Losses and changes can be hard but they also can open up new possibilities. **St. Mark's will continue to care for and minister to all ages that call this their spiritual home.**

I want to end this sermon and State of St. Mark's address by talking about a few things that I have learned this past year.

### **Mother Sylvia**

Adding the talented and thoughtful presence of Mother Sylvia to our staff has taught me about the joy of collaborative ministry, the depth of her compassion for all God's people has stretched and taught me much. I've learned to recognize anew the potential for leadership within members of all ages, as well as how much room for growth is still present within me. If you do not yet know Mother Sylvia, I ask you to schedule a one on one conversation with her so that you can make that pastoral connection and be enriched by knowing this remarkable person and priest.

### **Tree of Life**

The summer experience of creating St. Mark's Tree of Life in the Cecil Fish Courtyard was an amazing experience. It taught me that all the generations can be involved in making something beautiful for God. The mosaic involved those between the ages of 2 and 93 and that is amazing and a testament to the growing inter-generationality of this community. Our members young and old helped with all phases of this beautiful and lasting art in our courtyard and through it I learned that making art together is a deeply communal act that built relationships, healed people and helped members across the generations to get to know one another in a joyful and collaborative way. St. Mark's is famous for our Mosaic as it was featured on the Episcopal New Service and I had friends from around the country calling me to congratulate us on such a beautiful and meaningful project.

### **Hollyberry Fair**

I have to say that Hollyberry Fair was the biggest surprise of the year for me. It went from an event I dreaded to one I enjoyed and am looking forward to next year. What was the change: a new plan for involving as many members of St. Mark's as possible in the bake sale, signage, food, tours, book readings, music, cashier, silent auction, and more. It was an amazing event with so many new people from the parish helping out and making it fanatically successful. I learned that inviting deep participation brings a new dynamism and a new deeper sense of community and fun.

## **What Saint Mark's Needs from You**

My final words on this Annual Meeting Sunday are about what St. Mark's needs to keep thriving and growing.

### **Disciples**

In keeping with the theme of this sermon. **St. Mark's needs people who are willing to hear the call of Christ on their lives and entertain a more adventuresome possibility.** We need people who are willing to find their way into new leadership, new groups, new adventures in worship.

### **Financial Support**

**St. Mark's needs your financial support. We are entirely supported by our own giving to the life and ministry of this place. The things we love and care about deserve our loving attention and our generous support.** To be honest, St. Mark's attendance and membership has grown but our pledging has stayed nearly the same as last year. In fact, at present we have fewer pledging households than we have had in the previous two years but we have many more people in worship each week. There is something a little wrong with this picture. Someone asked me the other day if St. Mark's just looks so dynamic and healthy that some people might think we don't need their financial support to keep thriving. I think that could be a danger and the truth is that we do need everyone who calls St. Mark's their spiritual home to make some level of financial commitment for the year if we are going to be able to thrive and keep doing the work of God in this place. **The expectation is that every household that calls St. Mark's their church would make a pledge. So, at the risk of being a pesky priest, I call on each household who has not yet made a financial commitment of support for 2020 to do so today.** And from the bottom of my heart, I thank those of you who are already giving generously in support of this place, its staff, and all of the needs that come with having a building and grounds and offices and computer and kitchens and classrooms and boiler and A/C units and bread and wine and vestment and instruments and choirs and more.

### **Participation and Presence**

Lastly, we need your presence here. The church is made up of the people of God on the adventuresome journey into relationship with God. We need your help and participation to make that happen. There is no one else that is just like you, you are a deep mystery, endowed with gifts and insights and we need you to make St. Mark's a place where we are Building something beautiful for God in this neighborhood.

St. Mark's is a remarkable community and it is that way because of the loving care we show for one another. The things in life that we most desire cannot be purchased, they must be lovingly crafted by our willingness to build relationships, to honor one another, to care for young and old alike, to give generously of our financial lives and life energy, to take our places in leadership, to invest our best selves in ministry to one another, and above all to be faithful in our desire to follow Jesus on the new adventures that await in becoming friends of God.

I am grateful to be among you as your pastor and priest and to be on the journey of faith alongside each of you. It is a privilege to share your joys and sorrows and your surprising willingness to change and grow as a people of God. What a gift it is to be part of a community open to new possibilities of being church and to trust that God has placed us in this neighborhood for a purpose. Together we are making something beautiful for God in this place. Together let us continue to encourage one another to entertain a more adventurous possibility, the possibility of following Jesus, for that makes all the difference.

*Note: The idea of discipleship as a “more adventuresome possibility” comes from the writing of John Shea.*