When I left to go to seminary, I fancied myself leaving everything behind and responding to Jesus' call to follow him in the same kind of dramatic way those first disciples did. After all, I was saying goodbye to family and friends and a good job to head into the unknown, believing that I was answering a voice calling me to a totally new way of serving Christ. So it was that I wrote myself into the story: “Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee and called out to Simon and Andrew and James and John, 'Follow me.' Jesus passed through the town of Waynesboro and called out to Linda, 'Follow me.' And immediately they left what they were doing and followed him.” I have to admit, I was feeling pretty excited about this new venture and pretty proud that I had the courage to follow in the steps of the fishermen who first followed Jesus. Except...it took me three years from the time I heard the call to the day I left for seminary. The Virginia Synod required me to take some aptitude tests and meet with a psychologist and get the approval of a candidacy committee. I had time to ask the dean of the school where I was teaching if I could have my job back if seminary didn't work out. I had time to get health insurance and student loans, plenty of time to sell my furniture, find a new place to live and get a part-time job. I had time for doubts and questions and reassurances and escape plans. And then I had four years of study and practice before I was turned loose to figure out how to live the call I had received seven years earlier.

As it turned out, there was not much drama or spontaneity in my actions, no immediacy to the way I answered Jesus' call to follow him. I discovered I really had little in common with those first disciples, who had a split second to decide how they would answer Jesus. “Follow me.” These men had no time to talk it over with loved ones, no time to check out Jesus to see who and what he was, no chance to receive theological training or make sure their families were taken care of. These guys simply dropped their fishing nets right where they were standing; James and John left their father sitting in their boat and they followed Jesus. Mark uses one of his favorite words “immediately” to describe the lack of lag time between Jesus' invitation and the new disciples' response.

Mark's story is pretty inspiring. Leave everything to follow an itinerant preacher into the unknown, immediately. I wish I had the kind of trust and faith these men had, the kind of instinct it took to walk away from the certainty and security of their lives. As inspiring as I find these first disciples, I know I could never live up to their example. If Jesus told me today to leave all that I have here to go somewhere unknown, to some kind of undisclosed task, I don't think I could do it. Certainly not immediately. How about you? Do you also find Mark's account of the calling of the disciples inspiring but unattainable? Could you drop everything, leave behind your family, your home, everything you love about your life to serve Jesus? There aren't many people who could do that except maybe in the unencumbered days of youth. So where does that leave you and me? What does Mark's story have to do with the reality of our lives?

“Follow me.” When Mark recorded Jesus' words, he knew that it was not possible for his readers to follow Jesus in the same way the four did in the story. The historical, flesh-and-blood Jesus was no longer here. Jesus still needed disciples, still needed the young church to grow and thrive so the invitation to follow him was still fresh and real.

“Follow me.” The words now meant something different from when they were first uttered. Now, those who read and heard the invitation were called to follow Jesus by following his example, by living in the world in the way he had, by treating people the way Jesus treated them.

That's the call you and I receive. We are to follow Jesus right here, where we live and work. We are to learn all we can about Jesus and then serve him by living out his love and compassion every day. We follow Jesus by raising our children to love others, to reach out to those on the outside and invite them in. We follow Jesus by treating our customers and clients with respect and kindness. We follow Jesus by checking in on our neighbors and helping them when they need it, by working hard so we can support our families and help others. We follow Jesus in our faithfulness in worshiping and volunteering and sharing our possessions. We follow Jesus by caring about those the world ignores. We follow Jesus by inviting him into our homes to show us the ways of peace and justice, that we might practice those with one another then share them with the community around us. We follow Jesus by allowing him into every aspect of our lives, so he might move and breathe and act through us.

Though the particulars of our calls might look different, those first disciples and we share a common story. Just as Jesus met Peter, Andrew, James and John at the lakeshore, Jesus meets us by the water, too. In baptism, you and I are made brothers and sisters of Jesus. We are drenched in the waters of love and forgiveness. We are assured that there is nothing we can do to gain the love of God and nothing we can do to lose it. We are welcomed into the body of Christ and given freedom and permission to act in his name every day of our lives. When Jesus sees us by the lakeshore and calls, “Follow me,” he is inviting us into a deeper relationship with him and one another, into the fullest life we can imagine, into a revelation of who he is and what he means to the world. Just as following Jesus sometimes led to danger and uncertainty for those first disciples, it can lead to the same for us, but it is what we have been created to do. It's in our flesh and bone and DNA and denying it only leads to brokenness, confusion and despair.

In the closing passage of his book, “The Quest of the Historical Jesus”, doctor, theologian and scholar Albert Schweitzer, wrote, “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”

“Follow me.” You and I hear a chorus of voices every day, calling for our allegiance to a brand, a team, a movement, a passing fad. Only one voice rises above all the others, offering a clear, true invitation to come to know Jesus fully and wonderfully. Let us listen for that voice, the voice of our Lord and freely answer him - immediately.

Amen.

*Epiphany 3B*

*January 25, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Mark 1:14-20*