

Leaving Behind
Mark 1:14-20
January 21, 2024

This time last week, we were making last minute preparations for the freezing temperatures. I'm grateful for our collective efforts here at the church building. Last Saturday, I was making preparations at home. I covered up the outdoor faucets, just as everyone from the water district to the TV news to the checker at the convenience store recommended. Easy enough. I covered the water meter, even though I didn't understand why, and still don't really know. Also easy enough. Then I got to fretting. It's easy to remember how terrible that snowstorm and cold snap of February 2021 was. We didn't have running water at our house for a week and half. I shoveled snow into buckets so we could flush the toilets. That makes an impression on a person. We weren't expecting eight inches of snow this week, but we were expecting really cold temperatures. We had plenty of drinking water, so that was taken care of. But the bathroom situation wouldn't leave me. Hm. I filled up a 5 gallon bucket with the hose and stashed it in the garage. Then an empty 5 gallon water bottle. Then I remembered the old, worn out ice chest in the shed. I filled it up too. Those are all still sitting in the garage, waiting for us to need them. I'm fairly certain at least one other person in my family thought I was going overboard. But I said, "I hope this is all wasted and unnecessary effort, but I'm not going to be sorry I did it."

If you measure the usefulness of my effort by whether we ended up needing and using the water, then thankfully, my effort was wasted. We had no trouble with water at the house, and our water district kept the well pumping and water flowing. I'm thankful and don't take their effort for granted either. But if you measure the usefulness of my effort by the way I could worry less and breathe more deeply, then my effort was well worth it. And when I haul it back outside and water the yard with it, well, it's not wasted at all.

Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, said, "In God's economy, nothing is wasted." Not surprisingly, he was talking about our own difficult experiences and personal regrets. Even those, Bill W. says, are not wasted. In our failures, we learn humility. And probably more lessons than that, if we pay attention.

In God's economy, nothing is wasted. No experience, no kindness, no effort. Nothing is wasted. Everything fits into God's plans. Or, to say that another way, God can use anything and everything for good.

This week's gospel reading is in a lot of ways similar to last week's reading from John. Jesus calls disciples and they follow. Mark includes some details, though, and when Mark includes details they're probably worth paying attention to.

Simon and Andrew are first. They're fishermen, and they're fishing. Jesus says "Follow me and I'll make you fish for people." They left their nets and followed him. James and John are next. They're also fishermen. Jesus calls them and they leave behind their father Zebedee and their hired workers in the boat, still mending the nets.

Simon and Andrew leave behind their livelihood. James and John do also, and also explicitly leave behind their family. All of the disciples that Jesus ends up calling do much the same. They leave behind whatever lives they had had—livelihoods, farms, jobs, businesses—and their families—parents, maybe spouses and children. They leave the most important things in their lives behind to follow Jesus.

They had put a lot of effort into those important things, just like people today do. Was Jesus calling them to turn away from all that effort? To make that effort be, essentially, wasted?

Jesus was unquestionably calling them to something higher than work and family. But in doing so, I don't think he was devaluing, diminishing their prior lives, or making them into wasted time and effort. And the clue to why I think that is this: he called fishermen to fish for people. That is, he was valuing their skills and gifts that they already had, that they had worked hard to develop and improve. And he was calling them to use those skills and gifts for another end or goal, for the kingdom of God. Presumably, when Jesus called disciples who had other occupations and skills, he similarly valued their gifts and efforts and backgrounds.

The disciples leave those things behind, but they don't, anymore than we can forget all the places we've been and the people we've known and the experiences we've had. The disciples carry all that history with them as they turn to follow Jesus. They don't forget the patience they've learned as they mend nets and wait for storms to pass and cast their nets over and over again. That's not left behind. They're still using their fishing skills as they follow Jesus and fish for people. Everyone needs the patience of a fisherman. Those years of fishing for fish are not wasted effort. In God's economy, nothing is wasted.

You may remember the huge Memorial Day flood of 2015 on the Blanco River. It did huge amounts of damage to our Presbytery's camp, John Knox Ranch. A week or so after the flood, I went to help with cleanup. They had recommended

that we wear waterproof boots, as everything was still very muddy and all kind of critters were around. So I went to Walmart in Gonzales and bought a pair of basic rubber boots. Good traction. Men's size 8. They don't really fit. They didn't cost that much money, so I decided to just buy them for that one thing, and it would be worth the expense. I used them, and they fulfilled their intended purpose. Subsequently, I wore them in the aforementioned snowstorm in 2021. And in the past month I've worn them several times to help feed the mini horses, when it's been raining and their corral is muddy—and worse. I didn't leave those boots behind, but I had thought they would only be used for flood cleanup. But nothing in God's economy is wasted. I could not have foreseen 8 ½ years ago the circumstances that would lead me to be feeding mini horses in a rainstorm, but I have both skills and boots that I used earlier in my life. Boots and experience have come in handy as I help out friends.

I suspect this is a function of getting older, but I have any number of stories I can tell like that. Ways that God had been preparing me for something I had no way of foreseeing. But God knew. That's why nothing is wasted in God's economy. Because God knows what we will need later on, and how we can use it.

When we think we've left something behind, our nets, our fish, our friends, our family, we haven't really. We carry them with us. We carry those experiences and that knowledge, and the lessons we've learned that were both hard and easy. Jesus calls us not in spite of those things, but because of them. We will be able to use them, somehow, some way, in a life of discipleship.