

Answering The Call

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[0 : 0 0] As we look at our new year and God's challenge to us, it is always good, as our brother Nick has pointed out, it is good for us to take stock, to take stock of our faith and our lives, to take stock of the church in general.

I think it's important because as we look around us, Christianity, not only in certain parts of the world, the West, Europe, but we look at some of the mainstream denominations in South Africa, many, many churches are in decline.

As I look around me, I find that churches no longer exercise impact in their communities. Christianity, no longer, it would seem, exercises the impact that it has in centuries that have passed.

That's not always the case, but it is, in many, many cases, true here in our own country and in our own city. For many of us people, we know our families and friends.

Christianity doesn't always appear to work. And as you look back over your busy year, for us last year, it was undoubtedly a busy year, it might be that although you're not perhaps ready to admit it openly, Christianity is a failed project in your life.

[1 : 3 5] Although you today have come along, you continue to hang on to your faith, you have found, nevertheless, that your faith has been filled in the last months, in the last year, of failed expectations and disappointments.

I believe that's true for many of us. Indeed, for many of us, something is missing. If we look at the churches around us and the influence of Christianity, can we not also perhaps suggest that something is missing?

Why, you ask? Well, I think that so many churches today, and many of us, have forgotten something that is fundamental to faith, to Christianity.

We have forgotten the fact that we are called by Jesus. I think that's something that we have largely forgotten.

And as our eyes come now to look at this marvelous first chapter of Mark's Gospel, we observe that the first recorded act of Jesus' ministry is not a sensational sermon or a spectacular miracle, but a simple call, a simple calling of the disciples, hence our subject today.

[3 : 0 7] Because I think that when we forget that we are called by God, when we forget that we are called by God, we lose, I believe, the heart of our faith and its true power.

Perhaps that has already happened in your life. As we come to a new year, as we face 2023 and its priorities, I want us with God's help and the power of the Holy Spirit to rekindle our understanding of this magnificent and great reality.

We are called by God. When folk are asked today, churchgoers are asked today to define what Christianity is, we might say, well, a Christian is saved or a Christian is forgiven.

All true, but seldom, do we define Christianity as being called by Christ.

And yet Paul will address the churches in the New Testament as those who are called. He will address the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 2, and he writes, to the church of God that is in Corinth.

[4 : 33] Might as well be here in Plumstead. To those sanctified in Christ Jesus called to be saints. Describing his own apostleship, Paul will write, Paul called by the will of God to be an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Apostle simply means one who is called. Jesus himself states, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners in Mark 2 verse 17.

So again, the question for all of us on this first day of the new year is when last did you see yourself as being called by Jesus?

Because if that reality settles upon your life and your heart, it will be nothing less than revolutionary. It will revolutionize this church and the community around it.

[5 : 37] When last did you see yourself being called by Jesus Christ and the gospel? Look at Mark chapter 3 verse 13 where we read, He called, He called to Him those whom He desired.

God is a God who calls. Such is God's power, for example, that Isaiah even tells us in Isaiah 40 verse 26 that He calls the stars.

All reality is tied up in His will and His power and His purpose and His call. Now today we're going to study Jesus' call to these four disciples in Mark chapter 1 from verse 16 to verse 20.

It's read out to us a few minutes ago. We've got Simon and Andrew and then we have James and John. Now you might say, well, this story took place around about 2,000 years ago.

Does it apply to us today? Are we called as they are called? Well, there might be one or two differences, it's true, but I believe that this story in the Word of God is relevant to us today.

[6 : 50] For example, in Mark chapter 13 and verse 10, Jesus tells us that the same gospel that called these disciples to repent and believe must be preached to all nations.

We read that in Mark chapter 13 and verse 10. It must be proclaimed to all. Paul will state in Acts chapter 17 and verse 30, now he commands everyone.

In a sense, we might say, he calls everyone, everywhere to repent. So everybody in the general call of the gospel is summonsed to obey and to follow Jesus Christ.

Everyone is called and that means you. Now today, we're going to look at this story from three perspectives. I'm going to talk to you, first of all, about the power, the power of this call.

Then I'm going to talk about the people, the people who are called. Then we'll look at the purpose. What is the purpose of my call in 2023?

[8 : 05] And then I'm going to wrap up, pull it together, and look at the priorities of the call. So let's begin as we look at this magnificent passage and let's ask ourselves, what is the power?

How does the power of this call work? And as we unpack the meaning of the call, we will come with God's help to see how far we have wandered in many respects from the true power of Christianity.

You see, to call means what? It means to command. It means to speak to another in order to bring him or her nearer.

It implies leaving something behind. The biblical word for that is repent. It implies leaving something behind and adopting a new reality.

It's a profound concept that we are looking at here. It also means to commission somebody, to set somebody aside for a new task.

[9 : 17] Again, when it comes to its significance and power, we can even think about what Jeremiah said about his call in Jeremiah 1 and verse 5 where God spoke to Jeremiah and said, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

Before you were born, I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. Now, I don't deny the fact that we are not prophets like Jeremiah, but the same essential reality I believe applies to all those who are called by God in the congregation today on this first day of 2023.

In fact, in the Bible, when people are truly called and respond to the call, occasionally God changes their names.

Sarai, Sarah. How about Simon to Peter? That change speaks to us something of the change of person, the change of direction, the change of life.

They became new people. They were literally born again. Such is the call. And as we consider the power of the call, the scene here, in the New Testament, is the Sea of Galilee.

[10 : 54] It's a lake. Seven miles wide and about 13 miles long at its extremities. And in Jesus' day, fishing was a thriving industry on the lake.

There were more than 16 fishing ports on its shores, and the fishing industry supported several towns on the northeast shore, as together with maize, fish, not meat, was the staple diet of the time.

You've got this account of Simon and Andrew. They're casting a net into the lake in chapter 1, verse 16. Now, the word for casting here, interestingly, refers to a very specific type of circular net that would be weighted that you would cast out either from the shore or you would stand in the shallows.

Now, the reason why that is interesting is that the precision of the language suggests, without a doubt, an eyewitness account. Only an eyewitness account would go into such detail.

Now, in our culture, for the most part, young people today, younger people today, get to choose the vacation that they would like to pursue as an adult after school.

[12 : 19] I remember going to my parents and saying, I want to be an engineer. In our culture today, at the very least, young people have a choice, what they want to do.

But we need to understand, if we want to appreciate the power of the call of Jesus Christ, in those days, that was not the case. If you were born in Palestine or in Galilee or in Israel in the first century, in Jesus' day and age, and you were born into a fishing family, you would be a fisherman until the day you died.

That was the way that it is. It would mean nothing less than betraying your family if you decided you wanted to become a farmer, but you were born into a fishing family.

It was unheard of. Somebody throwing down his net in front of the hired hands, walking away from the fishing equipment and your own father to follow a rabbi is absolutely revolutionary.

We don't see it today in the 21st century, but I can assure you that is just while some first century readers might say in hearing the story, that's just not true.

[13 : 41] There's just no ways that you would do that. Have a look at Mark chapter 1 verse 17. Jesus simply says, again, no mighty sermon, no pleading, please. Please, Zebedee, let your sons go.

Nothing like that at all. No mighty miracle, no great act, glamorous act, just words.

Isn't that amazing? Just the words of Jesus. Come and follow. In other words, Christianity, as we're going to see, is not just, I believe some facts about God, I'm a Christian, thank you.

No, the call is not just, I believe some stuff, and I go to church. The call is, come and follow. Those are the two doing words.

And although I don't believe that he overrides our personalities when he calls us, he changes our personalities, such is his power that he calls those who he wants, and the sheep always recognize the voice of the shepherd.

[14 : 50] They follow him without fail. Look at Mark 1 verse 18 very carefully. At once, Mark loves that idea, at once.

Again, there's no let's go home and let's sit down with your family. I really please, if you don't mind Zebedee, I'd like to borrow your sons. Nothing like that. At once, at once, immediately they left their nets.

That is so controversial. It beggars belief, if you understood the culture, and they followed him. Come, come and follow.

There's no doubt that as we carefully study the account in all the gospels, that Jesus, whilst on this earth, was the most magnetic personality who ever lived.

Mark 1, verse 28, and again, at once, the power and the speed of the word of Jesus. At once, again, his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding area of Galilee.

[16 : 04] I think we're talking about hundreds of square miles, probably, further south. Nothing could prevent his call and its power. Nothing could stop, prevent his call to the disciples, whether it's secular powers, whether it's Herod, whether it's Pilate, neither death or sin or the work of the devil.

Nothing can stand in his way when he calls. Such is the power of our Savior, our risen Savior. John the Baptist is the one, by the way, that Malachi spoke about, read out a bit earlier, preparing the way for the Lord.

And John the Baptist said this, Mark 1, verse 7, after me comes one more powerful than I, well, what an understatement, more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I remember in those days news only traveled by word of mouth. There was no Twitter, there was no Elon Musk buying Twitter, there was no Instagram, there was no social media, there were no emails, cell phones and so on.

News traveled by donkey or by word to mouth. It could take months for news about an event to be picked up by people living just a few miles away.

[17 : 34] It's a very, very small closed-in society. There are no motor cars or highways or anything like that. and yet thousands of people in a very, very short period of time started to follow him.

In fact, there were times where the crowds were so bad that he couldn't even eat. He could hardly live a normal life. They followed him, they literally stalked him.

Mark 1, verse 33, Jesus had to come and perform a story. He was gathered together at the door. Just can't handle the situation.

On another occasion, Peter goes out to try and find him. In Mark 1, verse 37, he says, everyone, everyone is looking for you. Now, if we had to think about this type of incident occurring here in Cape Town in 2023, if Jesus had to come and perform some similar kind of ministry in 2023 here in Cape Town, what would it look like?

Well, it seems to me that if that's what happened, the airports and the highways in Cape Town would just be jammed up with cars. The N2, the N1, people would be excited and frustrated at the same time.

[18 : 52] In fact, I think normal economic life would just come to an end. Worse than stage 8 load shedding and COVID that we went through in 2020. The whole Cape Town would probably shut down.

The airports would be jammed up. Speaking about the power of Jesus and the power of the call, Mark uses a range of words which are not, the meaning of which are not 100% captured in the English translation just to describe the effect that Jesus had on people.

Often we read the fact that the people were absolutely astonished at his power. They were astonished. 1 verse 27, the people were all so amazed they asked each other, what is this?

What's going on? A new teaching. And with authority, he even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him. Sometimes Mark will say, they were amazed.

And then he will say, they were absolutely amazed. Then he'll write, it's almost like he's pushing the boundaries of language to try and describe the effect that Jesus had and his call had on people.

[20 : 11] Mark then will say, well, they were astonished, they were very astonished. I was amazed myself to find that somebody had written a PhD dissertation only on the words of amazement that Mark uses.

As Mark is grappling to try and find in human words a phenomenon that actually just about cannot be fully understood and described unless you were there.

Incredible. By the way, for those of us who are in the ministry, for those of us who are Sunday school teachers or pastors or council members or whatever, we in some kind of ministry, we need to notice that word ministry should be attractive.

Jesus was very attractive and it was his word, it would seem, that really made the difference. Word ministry should be an attractive reality.

It should be riveting. It should attract people. And I believe that at the beginning of 2023, as we look at this material in the Bible, I think Jesus wants us to change the way we look at him in the faith and to understand that his call is central to everything and it is nothing less than revolutionary.

[21 : 28] We want to understand the power of the call. We need to look at another favorite word that Mark uses. It's *exousia* in the original language. He uses it all the time and it can mean, for example, power or authority or glory.

For example, 122, the people were amazed all the time, amazed, astonished at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority, not like any other teacher like the teachers of the law.

If you were a rabbi, you would teach a passage and then you would say to your congregation, well, this rabbi says this about this passage and that other famous rabbi, well, he disagrees with the first rabbi, he says that, but then Rabbi Hillel or Rabbi Gamaliel, well, they say that and they say that and then everybody haggles about what the rabbis mean by the text, their versions.

Jesus just comes strolling in and says that's the meaning. Wow. He doesn't teach like anybody else. He calls his disciples in a way that reveals his power that it's constantly, without doubt, under wraps, but every now and again a little bit of his power becomes a reality and people are stunned.

You can see that Jesus is holding back and he's completely unintimidated by social norms. He's completely unintimidated by the socially or the politically correct.

[23 : 01] He redefines the status quo. He is outside of the status quo. He redefines the status quo. He redefines the meaning of life, even the meaning of family later on in the gospel.

He's not intimidated by anybody. He redefines the meaning of life, the meaning of reality, interprets the Bible as if it belongs to him, which it does.

He has such power that even touching his garment in faith brings healing. Nobody can stand up to him. The devil flees and Rome.

Nobody can stand up to him. He can defeat anyone. Such is the power of the call that, as Nick says, resides just as much here today as it did 2,000 years ago as we read his words.

The same word, come and follow. That's the power of the call. It's the most powerful reality in the world.

[24 : 07] Now, what about the people of the call? Well, we would assume that with this great opportunity, great power. only the rich and the famous who can pay, the Bill Gates type people of the world, Jeff Bezos, those are the guys that are called because they can pay.

No, that's not the case here. The people who are called are everyday people like you and I. They're just eking out a living. They're fishermen, they're farmers, whatever they are. They're everyday people like you and I.

They're not particularly special. They're not socially necessarily high class. And in the call he comes looking for us. He doesn't lock himself up in his little church on Sunday.

He goes out into Plumstead. He goes out into the community. He goes up to people. Interestingly, in their everyday lives, he goes out into the workplace.

He goes out into the world where people are living and working. He sees as he passes along. I love the way the scene is presented to us almost casually as he passes along.

[25 : 12] He sees these two brothers and there's just this summons. There's just this word. These words, come and follow. That's all they get because that's all they need.

They don't need necessarily a miracle. All they need is the word. Come, come and follow. He's all powerful word. I love those two verbs. Remember high school, grade nine or grade eight when they introduced verbs to us?

It's a doing word, isn't it? Come, come and follow. And now there's this total change of direction. Isn't that a great passage for 2023?

What should your resolution be for this year? Two words, guys. Make magnets out of them and put them on your refrigerator. Come and follow.

follow. And notice that he calls us. We don't call him. Now, that doesn't appear to be particularly exciting unless you understand the day and age in which Jesus did this because Jesus is completely different from the rabbis.

[26 : 19] See, the rabbis of the day, they didn't call their disciples. That never happened. You would sit down as a would-be disciple of a rabbi and you would decide who the coolest rabbi was and then you would make up your mind, I'm going to follow that guy.

The student always decided what rabbi he was going to study with. The student called the rabbi. Now, with this case here, with the only true rabbi, he decides.

Students don't decide for him, he calls them. Unlike any other rabbi in the history of the world. The other thing is that if you were a disciple of a rabbi in Jesus' day, your allegiance as a student was not to the rabbi per se, but to the Bible or the Torah, the Old Testament.

Your allegiance would be to the Torah, the rabbi would just be there to help you to understand the Torah. Your allegiance wasn't to the rabbi himself. But here, the call, the call of Jesus Christ is utterly different.

The allegiance is to Jesus Christ, even above scripture, because Jesus is the true giver and interpreter of scripture. And also, by the way, in those days, if you wanted to follow a rabbi, you would have a kind of a test first.

[27 : 46] If you wanted to follow a rabbi and you showed some interest, the rabbi would normally say, well, why should you be my student? And you'd have to show a certain amount of interest, a certain amount of proficiency, a certain amount of knowledge of the Old Testament, you'd have to prove that you were now worthy to follow this rabbi.

You needed to show that you were a pretty knowledgeable person, you knew a lot about God, but with Jesus, you just come as you are. Isn't that incredible? There's no entrance examination. You just come as you are with all of your problems, no qualifications are needed.

I wonder why that is the case. Well, you see, what does disciples need to learn can only be learned as they follow Jesus.

You want to be his disciple? You want to follow his call? Would you like to encounter the true power of Christianity? Has your Christianity been a life of failed expectations this last year?

Well, you haven't been following him, that's why. It's not just a matter of saying, I believe in certain facts and I come to church. know, to know Jesus, to encounter the life-changing power of the gospel, well, you've got to follow and trust him.

[29 : 10] Only then, once you've left the nets, metaphorically, can he truly be known. Otherwise, it's just a mystery. In other words, you cannot separate the word of the call from the person who calls.

And they didn't search for him. He searches for us, as he does this morning. He comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit and his word.

He initiates relationships, not just students who can learn facts. So those are the kind of people, they're everyday people, they're people like you and I.

And we don't call him, he calls us. Let's have a look at the purpose of the call. It's the purpose of it all. Well, the answer that Mark's gospel gives is contrary to the beliefs of most church goers today.

In fact, Jesus' answer to the question, what is the purpose of the call, as we look at Jesus' answer, we actually realize how far churches have wandered from the real purpose of the faith.

[30 : 20] come follow me, Jesus said, and I will send you out, or better, I will make you, I will make you fish for people, or I will make you fishers of men.

Now, I think of all the bizarre types of Christianity doing the rounds today. You know, you've got the therapy, Zanax, self-esteem gospel, where Jesus is a kind of psychologist, administering to all of our problems, helping ourselves to feel good about ourselves.

We've got the power gospel, wherein Jesus, as a miracle worker, power broker, gives us magical powers to overcome all of our obstacles in life.

Of course, we've got the prosperity gospel, where Jesus becomes a kind of an ATM in the sky, a vending machine in the sky to keep our bank accounts topped up, and to keep us spending at the local mall.

We've got the revival gospel, and so it goes on. Now, I'm not saying all these things are all bad, but what do these false gospel versions have in common?

[31 : 29] And the answer, of course, is that they all put the believer and not Jesus at the center of everything. So Christianity here, the kind of Christianity that so many of us perhaps unconsciously follow, is a type of consumer product, that is designed to fulfill my needs.

Jesus has to follow me and my bank account. Jesus follows me and my needs. Now, compare that with Mark chapter 1 and verse 17.

Again, those wonderful words, come, follow me. I will make you fishers of men. the primary purpose of the gospel is not to fulfill our needs, but we fulfill his priorities.

And again, you'll notice that following Jesus is a maturing process. I will make you. It's a process. And the purpose of the call lies outside of ourselves as we reach out to other people who don't know him, the lost.

And so discipleship in Mark is described as being with him, sitting around him, following him on the way. We learn as we go along.

- [32 : 49] As we fail, as we fall down, we get up again. We are not mere learners or students again. We are to do stuff. We are to become fishers of men and women. Such is the purpose of the call.

It's outside of us and our needs and our self-esteem. And as I wrap things up, as we move towards a conclusion, fourthly, what are the priorities of this wonderful call?

Let's think about 2023. Let's take stock of our lives and our roles here at St. Mark's here in Plumstead. There are two kinds of people. There are two groups of people that follow Jesus Christ.

Very clear in the Gospel of Mark. There are the outsiders and there are the insiders. See, the outsiders are where most people fall. the outsiders are the people who just follow him because they're interested.

Over the years in the ministry, I discovered that people come to church for all kinds of weird and wonderful reasons. Not all of them are Christ-centered. Some people come to church because they're lonely. Some people come to church because that's where their friends are.

- [33 : 56] Some people follow Jesus because of what they could get out of him. Those were the outsiders. They were always the larger group. And they followed him.

Again, I think for the sake of curiosity or to see what they could get out of him. And this group would prove to be unwilling to sacrifice anything to follow him. Jesus once said, and he often came out with these incredibly controversial statements to try and get us to think about the priorities of the call.

In Luke chapter 14 and verse 26, he says, we read that large crowds were traveling with Jesus and turning around to them, he said, if anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple.

Small wonder that at the end of the day, amidst the crowds, very, very, very few people accepted the call. It's like that in the church today.

isn't it true that most churches are really run by a handful of people who do all the work while everybody else warms a pew? It's the same thing today.

- [35 : 12] You've got insiders and you've got outsiders. Yes, a lot of people followed him, but very few answered the call. The much smaller inner group, the disciples, they were different.

They made lots of mistakes, sure, but they answered the call. Jesus once said, many are called, but few, are chosen in Matthew 22 and verse 14.

And so, again, for you today, and for me, is where do you fit in the scheme? Are you an insider or an outsider? Do you hang out at church on a Sunday just as one of the crowd members?

Are you an insider or an outsider? Well, as I wrap up, as we test ourselves, I believe that there are three priorities. There are three priorities evident in the lives of those who have heard and truly answered the call, the insiders.

The insiders, their lives will always show these three priorities and as we look at our own lives today and as we face 2023, let's ask God to help us to look at these priorities and match our lives up against them.

- [36 : 17] Very briefly, what's the first priority? Those who are on the inside. Those who have answered the call. Well, they prioritize the time, the opportunity. When Jesus introduces the gospel, he says in Mark 1, verse 15, the time has come.

The word for time here is not the normal word, but the word *kairos*. It means opportune time, necessary time. You see, people who answer the call, who are on the inside, are aware of the eternal stakes and perceive the urgency of the moment.

We've got to respond to the call before it's too late. while God's opportune time allows us to respond. Psalm 95, verse 7 says, as many of us know, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

We can see this in the lives of people who have responded to the call. They realize that the time is short. Jesus can come back, as Nick says. God's opportunity for me to repent of my sins, to stop living for myself, that this opportunity of grace that God has given me today will not necessarily go on forever.

And you know whether or not that word's for you. The second priority for those who are truly called is that they prioritize the kingdom and you can see it in their lives.

[37 : 45] Those who truly respond to the call embrace a big vision, a vision that is bigger than their own immediate needs and wants. You see, most of us place church and kingdom priorities into a pattern of lifestyle that seeks primarily to serve our own needs, whether family or financial or vocational.

And not that these things and themselves are wrong, but you see, when it comes to the true purpose of life, people who have truly responded to the call, people who are really part of Jesus' inner circle don't adopt this usual narrow Capetonian short-sighted vision of most of us as South Africans.

Everything is narrowly faced on me and my needs and the next promotion and the bigger car. You see it in their lives, guys. Their lives are taken up by a bigger vision, that of the kingdom of God and the call of the gospel, the need to go out into the community.

They realize that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Sure, it starts out small, but one day it is the kingdom that will fill the universe. And these kind of people are not discouraged by the days of little things and little fruit.

You see, and you can see it in their lives. They prioritize the kingdom, they prioritize the time, and finally, as I close, the third priority, those who truly respond to the call of Jesus Christ, they prioritize the lost.

[39 : 18] lost. I will send you out to be promoted at work. No. I will send you out to be more successful and to earn a lot more money, be a better car salesman.

No. I will send you out to fish for people. Wow. That is just so far away from the way the churches think today, beginning of the 21st century.

Going to the third decade of the 21st century, wow. What has happened to the lost? That is why, folks, we are called. We are called for the sake of the lost, and yet for most of us, well, we don't have any real sense of the terrible fate of the lost, do we?

Those who do not know Jesus, we know about them, we daily rub shoulders with them. But let me ask you this, do you really care about people who are going into eternity without Jesus?

Not really, let's be honest. It's the hardest thing that I had to try and get my guys in my church to worry about. They were so consumed by our godless, consumerist society that they just didn't care less for the lost.

[40 : 35] Does it consume you? Does it worry you? You look at the lives of people who are called by Jesus, they worry every day about the lost. So folks, today Jesus challenges us to change the way we see our faith and to answer the call.

To answer the call, folks, is nothing less than revolutionary. We ask you today at the beginning of 2023, do you feel the call?

Feel the power of his word? Again, you might ask, how does the call come to me? Today the call will always come to us in the same way that it did in the day of the disciples.

We have his word. That is how the call comes. We don't need anything else. We don't need any miraculous displays. We have the most powerful reality in our midst this morning and that is his word.

It is the word that addresses us in power in the communion service. In the Bible, it is the word that speaks down the ages to you, his all-powerful word. It is not a word that simply says, believe some facts, but it's a word that calls us to turn back from an unhelpful, sinful life and to come and to follow.

[41 : 52] So will you believe, but will you come and follow? Amen. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord, help us this year to come and to follow. Amen.