

## Ready to Answer the Call

*Grace, mercy, and peace to you from Christ Jesus our Lord who calls us to follow. Amen.*

By the time I was in high school, I had begun to really enjoy volunteer work. My hometown had multiple small festivals and events where I would get the opportunity to help out by parking cars, loading and unloading shuttle busses, running different lighting and sound equipment, picking up trash or a dozen other small tasks. And often, I'd go with my parents to other larger events, things like the county fair or the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix, and we'd do much the same sort of work. I loved it. I loved being part of the behind the scenes of special events.

But as much as I loved that volunteer work, I craved a more regular gig. While I helped out at most of the same events every year, they were different things sponsored by different groups. In high school, I was already thinking about what made good resume material. And I wanted to be able to claim more than half a dozen small events.

I wanted to join our local volunteer fire department, but my parents vetoed that idea pretty quickly. But after some research and more false starts, I landed on the idea of wilderness search and rescue. It was the perfect combination of my love of the outdoors and my desire to get involved in emergency services, AND my parents were on board with it.

The summer before my senior year of high school, I officially became a member of the White Oak EMS Search and Rescue team. With at least one meeting or training every month, and the possibility of getting called out for a search, it was the perfect answer to my desire to have a volunteer organization to *belong* to. And even though I only went on two real searches during that first year, I was hooked.

The next year, before I even started college at WVU, I had done my research and knew that there was a search and rescue team based in Morgantown. And so, on the first week of classes, I rode my bike to the fire station where they were holding their month meeting, with a completed application in hand. I was ready.

And over the next four years, I got a lot more experience training and going on searches. I learned how to be ready, keeping most of my essential gear in a backpack that was always in my Jeep. Having a few other sets of equipment in duffle bags or milk crates, ready to be tossed in as needed.

Back then, the team was just starting to be able to send out dispatch information via cellphone. You'd get a text message with a few sentences of information. "62yo hunter missing in Preston County, call *so and so* if available." And in those minutes, you had to make a judgment call, "Am I available to go on this?" "If I go now, how long am I able to stay?" "If I don't go now, when might I be free to go?"

In general, you would call one of the team leaders with your answers to those questions. Either that you were available and on your way, or that you'd be free after a certain time, or maybe you didn't think you could go, but you would be willing to work the phones for others who would be. With time and experience, it became easy to absorb the little bit of information we would receive and determine whether this would be a simple search that wrapped up in an hour or two, or whether it might be something that would drag on. And with that knowledge, you could pack extra stuff as needed, or make arrangements to cancel plans or call off from work.

I loved my time doing search and rescue, and it only got me more interested in emergency services. And so when I moved again, this time to Gettysburg to start seminary, yet again, I had done my

research, and I showed up with a completed application, this time, not for a search and rescue team, but for the local volunteer fire department.

And when I joined the fire department, my understanding of being ready for calls changed completely from what it had been with search and rescue. Most fire calls, are much more urgent than your average search callout...

You don't have to worry about packing the right camping gear into duffle bags or your trunk. Most everything you need gets carried on the fire trucks themselves, you just have to get to the station, or maybe go straight to the scene with a little bit of safety equipment in your personal vehicle. You don't have fifteen or twenty minutes to decide whether you can go and what you'll need to bring, which makes sense because you're rarely committing yourself to any more than a few hours at a go.

But even so, when your pager goes off, or the whistle blows, you take a moment to take stock and think about whether you can go. Again, with experience, it's easy to know how long a typical wreck takes to clean up, how long you might be expected on scene for a house fire, or cutting up trees after a windstorm. And in a split second you weigh that knowledge against your awareness of the rest of your day.

Just a few hours ago, my fire department was dispatched for a wreck. Within just a few seconds I thought about the fact that the wreck would probably pull me out of the house for at least an hour, maybe two. I thought about how I didn't have any obligations during that timespan, but that my wife Bekah was getting ready to go visit a friend this evening and that leaving her alone with our daughter Annabelle would create some extra unnecessary stress for her as she tried to get ready for her visit, and eventually probably cause some stress for me, too, as \*I\* tried to get ready for worship this evening.

So, I decided not to go. And as I listened on the scanner, it sounded like they did fine without me.

But that background, my experience of being on call in one way or another for the better part of 14 years, is what bears on my mind when I hear today's Gospel story about the call of the first disciples.

Jesus doesn't give them *any* background about what he's calling them toward...

Or at least that's what Mark's Gospel might lead us to believe.

I'm sure many of us would be uncomfortable with this sort of situation. Where Jesus simply says, "follow me."

WE want to know the details: What do you need us to do? How long will we be away from home? What skills do we need? What do we need to bring with us? What will be provided? Should I bring my heavy winter parka? Or just a light raincoat?

But Jesus gives none of that, he looks at these fishermen along the sea of galilee: he looks at Simon, Andrew, James and John, and he just says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

And believe it or not, they all just go. They drop what they're doing, and they follow. Apparently, whatever they felt like they needed to be ready to follow a Galilean carpenter into the unknown was fulfilled.

They were ready. And they answered the call.

Frankly, I can say that I probably would not have been so ready. Even as a relatively young pastor, even as someone who went straight from high school to college to seminary to my first parish, you'd think that I knew that I was going to go into ministry my whole life, but I didn't.

I don't think I was ready the first time that Jesus started calling me to follow. I needed to get some of those unknowns sorted out first. But just like Jonah in our first reading, eventually I had heard the message enough to become a believer, to turn toward that call rather than run away, rather than hide. I just needed a nudge or two along the way.

God and Jesus don't call everyone to be pastors, but I know that God calls each one of us just the same.

Maybe one of the reasons that the first disciples were so ready and willing to follow Jesus was because he framed the work he was calling them to do in terms of what they were already familiar with. He didn't look at a group of fishermen and say "Hey, I'd like you to come be healers." He looked at a group of fishermen and said "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

And through that, I have to believe that sometimes Jesus' call to ministry comes in the form of something familiar. I'll never forget hearing the story of the middle-aged man who began a monthly free dinner at my internship congregation, he told me "I like to eat. I like to cook. I wondered if God might be able to use that, because I was so thankful for everything that God had given me."

And even though I followed the call to be a pastor, my experience answering calls for search and rescue and fire and EMS has continued to be a blessing and an asset for me in ministry.

And whether you're a pastor or a parent or a teacher or a garbage man, you have a way to answer God's call. You may not feel like you've heard it just yet, but it's there.

We just have to be ready to follow when Jesus calls. And I know that's the basis for Paul's confusing warning about time being short in the letter to Corinthians. It's simply yet another encouragement to put away the things that might prevent us from answering the call, so that when we have that experience where God is saying "Come and follow me," we can rise up, ready to do the Lord's work. Thanks be to God. Amen.