

A demanding leader: Mark 1:14-20

If it were me, I would have stayed in the fishing boat or dithered about what to do until Jesus was just a speck on the horizon.

by [Cynthia Anderson](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

They didn't ask questions. That's what always astonishes and terrifies me about this story from Mark. Jesus shows up by the Sea of Galilee, calls out to Simon Peter and Andrew, tells them he's going to upend their lives and give them a new vocation, then commands them to follow him without a backward glance or a thought for the family fishing business. Mark records no questions asked by either of the fishermen. In the space of one more sentence, Jesus issues the same call to James and John with the same results. In a flash they're out of the boat and following Jesus.

I'm sure I'd blurt out, "Who are you and where are you going?" "What's your plan and how do I fit into it?" "What happens to my family business and all the people it supports?" "Why are you calling *me*?" And: "Once we catch these people you're teaching us to fish for, what are we supposed to do with them?"

There's no business plan, no evangelism outreach strategy, no job description, no interview and no time to consider the pros and cons of the offer—just an itinerant preacher who appears on shore, shouts an invitation and walks on.

To be honest, I think I might have stayed in the boat or dithered about what to do for so long that Jesus would have been a speck on the horizon before I made my move.

Yes, I know that biblical scholars caution us against reading texts as if we could just plop them into the 21st century with no attention to context, and I know that this story, like the call stories that permeate the Bible, is particular to a time and a people. But on Sunday mornings we cross hermeneutical bridges to ask our 21st-century listeners to encounter God revealed in the word—to catch a glimpse of Jesus, to hear his proclamation of the kingdom and his call. These call stories confront us with the reality that God has a habit of showing up unexpectedly in the

oddest places and inviting us to see, listen and turn around from where we are and follow him—no questions asked.

In this story, Jesus has come to Galilee announcing God's Good News. But the proclamation of Good News is no longer an abstract rumor circulating at local gatherings; a person is looking at particular people and inviting them to participate in his mission. It has that "take it or leave it" note. Jesus tells them he wants to make them part of his life and mission, and they must decide what, if anything, to do in response.

Have things really changed? What does it take for those of us in the ordinary boats of life to respond immediately to Jesus' invitation to get out of whatever boat we're in and follow him, no questions asked? What keeps our feet stuck to the bottom of our particular boat?

A list of rather obvious barriers quickly comes to mind. We have responsibilities to families and members of our churches and communities. They expect us to be in the boat every day doing what we do to fulfill our responsibilities to them. Wouldn't it be irresponsible, even crazy, to walk away with some street preacher?

If we can somehow move beyond that barrier, there are also some prudent cautions on our checklist. We're supposed to carefully analyze the situation, set goals and make a plan. The idea of pushing that carefully crafted plan overboard at the crook of Jesus' finger leaves many of us with shaky hands.

But perhaps the stickiest glue holding us in the boat is the desire to be in control. We go to elaborate lengths to gain and assert control over our lives, families, work and finances. Much of this control is an illusion we conjure to keep from seeing and admitting the truth—that even with all of our diligence, financial markets may crash, disease may enter our lives, people may behave badly and relationships may be damaged. It's hard to live with these quavering uncertainties, so we hide or pretend we've got it all under control.

This can make it difficult to respond to Jesus' call, because in order to say yes we have to follow a leader who stands the world on its head. He brings us face-to-face with our humanness and challenges us to stake our lives on his promises instead of our plans. Following Jesus is life-giving and transformational—but we don't get to draw the map or have our questions answered before we start walking. We have to listen to Jesus' call and take the first step.

It can be downright uncomfortable. Jesus stands on shore giving an invitation that makes real promises with real demands. The one thing that makes it possible for us to follow is that we know he will walk the entire way with us, leading the way right into the kingdom.