

Tom Coop
Mark 1:14-20
January 21, 2018

“Dear Tiny Baby Jesus”

If any of you are Will Ferrell fans, you may be familiar with the 2006 film, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*.

In it, Ferrell plays the role of Ricky Bobby, a dimwitted soul who also happens to be the most successful driver on the NASCAR circuit.

In typical Will Farrell fashion, Ricky Bobby is morally and ethically bankrupt. The only things that matter to Ricky Bobby are winning races and self-indulgence.

But Ricky Bobby is also religious ... after a fashion. In one scene, he is saying grace before a meal.

He prays, “Dear Tiny, Infant, Jesus . . .” And he continues to address Jesus throughout the prayer as “Lord Baby Jesus.”

Finally, his wife and his father-in-law decide to interrupt him as he prays to the Lord Baby Jesus.

Carley, his wife, says: “Hey, um, sweetie . . . Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him baby. It’s a bit odd and off-puttin’ to pray to a baby.”

To which Ricky Bobby replies, “Look, I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I’m sayin’ grace. When you say grace, you can say it to Grownup Jesus or Teenage Jesus or Bearded Jesus or whoever you want.”

It's a bizarre sequence, but also quite revealing. I suspect that many of us would prefer to keep Jesus as a baby.

Many of us would agree with Ricky Bobby that the Christmas Jesus is best.

The Christmas Jesus is no threat to our adolescent views of the universe or our self-serving views about faith.

Christmas Jesus is soft and huggable. He says nothing to us about taking up a cross or saving a dying world.

But "Tiny, Infant, Jesus" isn't the only portrayal of Jesus in the movie. Ricky's best friend, Cal, has his own ideas about Jesus.

Cal describes his Jesus like this: "I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo t-shirt. 'Cause it says like, I wanna be formal, but I'm here to party too. I like to party, so I like my Jesus to party."

Jesus in swaddling clothes or Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt, these are visions of a Jesus who never challenges us, never provokes us, never paints a picture of what we can yet be.

From the very beginning of his Gospel, Mark gives us a picture of a grown-up Jesus.

Mark says nothing about Jesus' birth. Instead he begins with Jesus' baptism at the hand of John the Baptist.

Then, Mark says to us, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

“‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

This is significant. John the forerunner had done his job which was to prepare the people for the coming Messiah.

Now that his work was done, Jesus’ work was just beginning.

So, after John is arrested, Jesus lays down the tools of his trade and goes to Capernaum, where he calls his disciples and starts his ministry.

Mark says, “Passing along by the sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Come after me, and I will make you fishers of people.’” (1:16-17)

Now, on the surface, it sounds so simple: Jesus walks up to two total strangers, calls to them, and they walk away from it all – their old way of life, their livelihood, their friends and family.

Charles Page, a minister and archeologist in Israel, offers a different perspective.

The way he sees it, Jesus grew up in Nazareth, and when he was old enough, he apprenticed with his father as a builder in the nearby Roman capital of Sepphoris.

When he wasn’t working, Jesus ventured out on his own to explore his surroundings and make friends his own age.

And what better place to meet people than Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee?

It's only about fifteen miles from Nazareth; plus, it was on the main crossroad connecting two major north-south trade routes – the King's Highway to the east with the Via Maris to the west.

It was like living near an Interstate highway as compared to living in the boondocks.

So, it's altogether possible that Jesus went over to the Sea of Galilee periodically and met other young men who, like himself, had ideas and aspirations for their lives.

Perhaps they camped out together, or maybe they went fishing. And, while they were together, they talked and shared their hopes and dreams for the future, as well as their faith and understanding of life.

It wouldn't be hard to imagine that, as Jesus talked about his relationship to God and his vision of God's kingdom on earth, these other young men realized that Jesus was more than a carpenter.

That there was something special about him, something that demanded their allegiance.

So, when Jesus got word that Herod had arrested John the Baptist, he took it as a sign that it was now up to him to pick up the mantle and proclaim God's Word.

So, he goes to Capernaum to the cove where Simon and Andrew and James and John kept their boats, and he says, "It's time. The kingdom is at hand. Let's go. Follow me."

In this sense, Simon, Andrew, James and John were not strangers, but friends, and Jesus' call was something they'd known was coming for a long time.

Well, it's only a theory. You can take it for what it's worth.

But thinking of how Jesus may have called his disciples in this way opens the door for us to consider how God is calling to us today.

For example, God's call usually comes about gradually over a long period of time.

Most often, it's something you've thought about and talked about with others.

You may have even given it a trial run like going on a mission trip or doing a summer internship or serving as a volunteer.

Every once in a while, you hear of people like the Apostle Paul, who had a blinding light experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), but, for the most part, God's call comes more quietly, more gradually, subtler than that.

If that's the case, could it be that God is at work in your life today tugging at your heart, pricking your conscience, nagging you to do something special, to be the person God is calling you to be?

Not only does God's call often come slowly, over time, it also comes most often to common ordinary people – people like these young Galilean fishermen – people like you and me.

Now, you'd think that if Jesus intended to usher in the kingdom of God on earth, he would've gone straight to the Temple and asked the chief priests and scribes to help him.

That he would have gotten the blessing of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council.

But no, he went first to these Galilean fishermen, who had no formal religious training or social standing.

Why, scholars believe that John was probably no more than a teenager at the time!

And, if you go on to study the lives of all twelve disciples, you'll find that none of them – not one – had what the world would call the “right stuff” to lead a movement that would eventually turn the world upside down.

Then and now, the truth is, God calls the most unlikely folks to be the church, the body of Christ in the world today, not those who are particularly gifted.

Remember what Paul wrote to the Corinthians? He said,

“²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

“²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-27)

God calls common, ordinary people to do his bidding. But, in order to answer God’s call, we have to be willing to put him first.

What do you think was the first thing that went through Peter’s mind when Jesus said, “Come, follow me”?

I can imagine him thinking to himself, “Who’s going to take care of my boat?”

Or, “How am I going to make a living?”

Or, “What in the world am I going to tell my wife?”

These are practical questions, and everyone who’s ever answered God’s call, in a way, has asked them. You wouldn’t be honest if you didn’t.

But, if Peter was worried about his boat, just think of James and John. In order to follow Jesus, they had to leave their father, Zebedee, behind.

They worked together with him every day since they were kids. What do you think was painted on the transom of the boat but, “Zebedee and Sons”?

Seriously, hanging out with Jesus was one thing, but leaving your father and going off to preach the gospel?

This is heady stuff. Yet, that’s what Christ demands if we’re to follow him.

In the Gospel of Matthew, he said, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me isn't worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37)

And in Luke, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62)

In order to answer God's call, you have to be willing to put him first, and that usually involves making some tough decisions.

The promise is, when we say yes to God's call, the most amazing things happen.

But first, we still have to say "YES." The problem is, most of us, even when we hear the call, delay. And we are good at delaying, aren't we?

A heavy rain had been falling as a man drove down a lonely road.

As he rounded a curve, he saw an old farmer surveying the ruins of his barn. The driver stopped his car and asked what had happened.

"Roof fell in," said the farmer. "Leaked so long, it finally just rotted through."

"Why in the world didn't you fix it before it got that bad?" asked the stranger.

"Well, sir," replied the farmer, "I guess I just never did get around to it. When the weather was good, there weren't no need for it, and when it rained, it was too wet to work on!"

Those of you who are homeowners know the perils of allowing home maintenance to slide.

But that's true in all of life: In the things that really matter, there is often a need to act with urgency.

Important things should rarely be put off. You see, life has a way of getting away from us.

Mark shows us a Jesus who is in a hurry; a man with a sense of urgency.

Scholars have noted that Mark used one word in his Gospel more than any other. It is the word "immediately."

This word is used forty times in those brief 16 chapters of Mark's Gospel. The last thing Jesus wants is procrastinators.

I challenge you to find one place in the New Testament where Jesus told anybody to "go home, think it over, and get back to me tomorrow."

It simply doesn't happen.

Jesus comes to Simon and Andrew and James and John at their fishing boats beside the Sea of Galilee and says to them, "Follow me," and immediately they left their nets and followed him. Cuz they were ready!

Maybe he had been preparing them for years, but when the call came – it demanded immediate action.

Jesus' invitation is always an invitation to do it now!

And, that is especially true with the call to follow him. Because if we don't, we can often lose our way.

A story is told of Albert Einstein, the great physicist. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger.

When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket.

It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat by him. He couldn't find it.

The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it."

Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets.

As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket.

The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one."

Einstein looked at him and said, "Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going."

When we fail to respond to God's call, we often are left not knowing where we are going.

Aren't sure you are equipped for the job? Don't worry. God is in the habit of calling rank amateurs like you and me and putting his kingdom in our hands.

He calls us to obey, to do his will, and expand his rule in the lives of people in all kinds of circumstances.

The sad thing is, we have all too often failed to respond to that call.

So here is my prayer for you AND for me:

For all the times we ignore what God commands, for the occasions when we have selected hearing and hear only what we want to hear, for all the times we have let down other people because we have gone our own merry way believing that what God is asking is insane...

For all these occasions and more, may God grant each of us ears to hear when he is speaking and willing hearts to obey what he commands.

For he calls you and me, mere amateurs in matters relating to his kingdom, to be his hands and feet in this community.

So, may we all answer that call, whatever it is, whenever it comes.

Because, when we do, we will find that life is fuller, deeper, and more interesting than it has ever been before.

Amen!