

**BE THERE**  
***Sermon for Epiphany 3B: Mk1:14-20***  
LPC, 1/25/09

By now you will probably have heard of Chesley Sullenberger III. Chesley Sullenberger III is the pilot who recently landed an airbus in the Hudson River after both engines failed. Captain Sullenberger handled this disaster with no loss of life, few serious injuries, and little damage at ground level.

I saw an interview with Captain Sully's family shortly after his identity as the skilled and quick-thinking pilot of the doomed aircraft was known. Mrs. Sullenberger said that her husband would resist being called a hero, because he was just doing his job. All pilots are drilled to deal with crises like this. Her husband was just one who had to exercise this seldom-needed training.

This type of modesty seems characteristic of the people we call heroes. They are not extraordinary people. They are ordinary people who are called, seemingly by chance, to act in extraordinary circumstances. Captain Sully was called to act in such circumstances.

Today's gospel story about being called. Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John. This story from the Gospel of Mark invites reflection on the calling of ordinary people.

Simon, Andrew, James and John have one thing in common. They are fishermen. Ordinary people. But Jesus calls these ordinary people to be his first disciples. They will remain Jesus' closest associates throughout his ministry, judging from the relative frequency with which their names are mentioned in all four Gospels.

What does it mean to be called by Jesus? Or called by God? In church we tend to use the word "call" in a special way. "That person has been *called*," we say in slightly awed tones, when a member of the community visibly demonstrates skill for ministry. But does not today's story from the Gospel of Mark belie our assumptions that a call from God must be obvious and involve some kind of exaltation?

Examining the call story of these four fishermen tells a lot about how God may be calling ordinary people like us.

First, as I've already touched on, these people have displayed no talent or predisposition for ministry. Their obvious skill set lies in a completely unrelated field. This tells us that God's call is democratic, and not based on talent or accomplishment. There is no interview or competency test. You don't need a title or special education or letters after your name. God calls lay people. God calls anybody. This means that God calls people like you.

Secondly, though God calls anybody, God does not issue an all-points bulletin or general call to arms. God does not take out full-page ads or place notices on EBay. God approaches individuals and says, "Follow me."

Thirdly, although God approaches individuals, God does at least occasionally call people in pairs. This reminds me of what I and my classmates were taught when we entered seminary. When a person is called to seminary, that person's whole family is called to seminary, though only one of them may attend classes and obtain a degree. Sometimes God's call is for a ministry of support.

Finally, God's call may involve a total change of life, as it did for the four fishermen. Or, it may not. Zebedee, the father of James and John, remained in the boat. We don't know about what happened to him. Did he, inspired by his sons, also become a follower of Jesus, or did he reject the Gospel? We don't know. But from other biblical texts we know that Jesus does not always require people to completely change their life. Following Jesus may be understood as an orientation toward the Kingdom of God. Fishing may be done oriented toward the Kingdom of God. Housewifing may be done oriented toward the Kingdom of God. So can doctoring or lawyering or car repair or grocery-bagging.

The effect of this story of call to Simon, Andrew, James and John should be to alert each and every one of us to God's call on our lives. We are not all called to go to seminary. But we all are called to follow Jesus and orient ourselves toward God's kingdom of love, forgiveness, healing, feeding, reconciliation, and the perfection of creation.

We may never be called to heroic action on behalf of the faith, as Captain Sully was called to heroic action. But if we are, it will not be because of any demonstrated excellence on our own part. Most of the time when people are called to heroic action, it will be because they are the ones who happened to *be there* when action was needed.

Possibly the most heroic action of my life happened because I just happened to *be there*. A virtual stranger at a conference was moved to make confession to me. God used me to help save this young woman from a morass of sin and exploitation, because I happened to *be there* when she needed someone. This was not because I am such a darn good pastor. I was not a hero. I was just *there*.

God's call comes to ordinary people. God's call is not always to heroic action. But when God does call to heroic action it is to ordinary people who are there at the time.

Be there.