

Pastor Jim Lincoln
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“Follow The Thread” Mark 1:14-20

In 1872, George MacDonald wrote a great little children’s book called *The Princess and the Goblin*. The spiritual connections to the life of faith are everywhere to be found in his story. Irene, an eight-year old princess and the daughter of a great king lives in a castle of privilege and style. However, there are also Goblins—hideous creatures, who also live in the land. As the legend goes, in years long forgotten, wicked kings abused and overtaxed these strange creatures and instead of fleeing to other countries they went underground to live in the darkness of caves. When they did come out, it was only at night and most often only to seek revenge and harass the sun-folk who lived above ground. Their one great passion was to someday overthrow the people above and rule above as well as below. Goblins have two weaknesses: they have very tender and sensitive feet and they can’t stand good poetry. But you will have to read the story to learn more about that.

One day Irene, who was bored with her hoard of extravagant toys went exploring in the upper floors of the castle. While snooping around, she discovered her fairy grandmother sitting in a chair spinning a mysterious thread on a wheel. The old woman was beautiful and mysterious and to most, she was invisible. And, it turns out, that the thread the old woman was spinning was to be a gift for Irene. One day, the old woman took the ball of thread, tied it to a beautiful ring, and put it on Irene’s finger. She told Irene that *anytime she gets afraid* all she has to do is to take the ring off, put it under her pillow, and then simply follow the thread. The thread would always lead her back to her fairy grandmother where she would be safe from all harm. Now, Irene couldn’t actually see the thread, but the old woman said,

“Oh that’s OK, it is too fine a thread to be seen by the naked eye. But if you just feel for it between your thumb and your forefinger you’ll feel it. Just follow the thread wherever it leads you. Now...listen because this is very important, The thread may lead you in a round about way, which may seem odd to you. But...DON’T DOUBT THE THREAD...FOLLOW THE THREAD WHEREVER IT LEADS, AND KNOW THIS, I WILL ALWAYS BE HOLDING ON TO IT ON THE OTHER END. IT WILL ALWAYS LEAD YOU TO ME.”

One night Irene heard Goblins out outside her bedroom door. She became terrified. So, she took off the ring put it under the pillow, and began to follow the thread. But, instead of leading her upstairs, it took her outside and away from the castle and down straight into the caves where the goblins lived. The further she got away from home, the deeper, darker, and scarier the journey became. Eventually she came to a pile of stones that blocked the path. There was no way she could get past the pile of stones. However, facing home she could no longer feel the thread. It only worked going forward. Yet, the wall of stones blocked her forward progress. She couldn’t go forward and she couldn’t go backwards. Have you ever felt that way? So, she did what many do. She threw herself down to the ground crying and complaining. After her little temper tantrum, she got up and tried to budge the stones, but they were just too big and too heavy. Then she used her fingernails and began to claw away in between the stones. As she scraped and clawed, her nails began to break and her knuckles began to bleed, but eventually the rocks began to loosen. To her amazement, on the other side of the stone wall, was her dear friend Curdie, who had been trapped in the stone prison by the goblins. Both of them were overcome with joy and surprise. Initially, Curdie didn’t believe Irene’s story about her grandmother and the thread, it’s just beyond anything in his experience. But what he can’t deny is that because Irene believed in the thread and followed the thread he was rescued. There’s an epic battle where a whole lot of foot stomping takes place and the wicked goblins are defeated. Please read it to your grandkids.

Here’s what I want to say this morning: *Follow the Thread! Don’t doubt the Thread!* Here’s what I mean. We’ve been studying Mark to make sure that we are following the real Jesus and the real gospel—not one of our own making. Our passage this morning gives us the first words of Jesus’ public ministry, words, which Mark wants us to trust.

“Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe.’”

Where will the threads of the gospel lead us? I see three places:

1. To a kingdom.
2. To repentance
3. To belief

The first word Jesus uses to describe the gospel is *kingdom*: *“Jesus preached the gospel of God saying, The kingdom of God is at hand.”* You will not be following Jesus—as he really is— unless you follow him as the rightful king of the universe.

Beginning the gospel as an announcement of the kingdom of God is critical. Jesus is addressing our greatest need - that is to live in reality with the way things really are. To deny the kingdom of God is to deny God His rightful place at the center of the universe and your heart. This denial is the most destructive thing you can do. It will lead to psychological, social, and physical destruction. As long as *your* focus, *your* ambition, and *your* will remain as the drive shaft of your life, you will break down, psychologically, relationally, and physically. The greatest need you and I have to thrive emotionally, relationally, and socially is to remove ourselves as the gravitational pull of our lives and acknowledge that God is the only one worthy and able to be there.

Now I’m blessed to have a two-year old granddaughter. Ava brings more joy and gladness to our lives than we ever imagined. However, as she entered the land of two-year olds something became very important to Ava. Ava began to let us know in no uncertain terms that Ava wants what Ava wants. And one of the things we really like about Ava is that she doesn’t have an ounce of subtlety. That means that she acts out everything right before your eyes for all to see. Ava is drawing on what is becoming a huge repertoire of ways she will use to get her way. She has discovered my neighbor John’s blueberry bushes. So, when Ava comes over she says to grandpa, “Grandpa, Ava wants *buberries*,” which is a reasonable request and our neighbor doesn’t mind. So, I take her over and let her pick enough buberries to satisfy an elephant. Yet, inevitably there comes a time when you have to walk away and say enough is enough. Now, my kids are great disciplinarians, so I have no complaints there. But, when it is time to go, Ava doesn’t want to go. So, here’s what is so interesting to me. That little cherub will do anything to stay there and eat buberries. I’ve begun to catalog her strategies. She will beg, plead, and weep to eat more buberries. If those tactics don’t work, she will fain madness, shut down emotionally with her head down and her bottom lip stuck out. Now, I know you don’t believe all this from my perfect grandchild (she must have gotten it from her dad’s side of the family.) But if you pull her away from those berries, she will become sulky, surly, and get depressed. She will even get combative. Now, what is so interesting to me about this is that Ava’s not that much different than most adults that I know, including me. Oh, we’re more sophisticated about it. But I’ve counseled enough people over the years to say without the fear of contradiction that we want what we want and we will do just about anything in our power to get it . We will plead, beg, weep, wail, connive, scheme, shut down, get sick, become non responsive, embittered, angry, and combative. We will even invoke God to get what we want. We will manipulate others, throw sophisticated temper tantrums, and threaten one another. We will do just about anything to get our way. I know this first hand. I’ve tried just about all of these at one time or another and am on the receiving end not infrequently.

The passion to get our way, to be the king of our lives, and to have our way is at the heart of most of our problems. Not all. Don’t misunderstand me; there are many problems that simply have to do with living in a fallen world. But, often the breakdown of our emotional, physical, relational, and social health is directly connected to the fact that we can’t get our way and we’re mad about it and we will do just about anything in our power to get it.

To follow Jesus is about healing relationships... first with God and then with others. *And the only way this is possible is to follow Jesus as king of your life.* To follow Jesus is about entering into the realm of a worthy

king. Where Jesus is... there is a kingdom. This means to follow a new king who demands priority over every competitor. As long as you put yourself at the center, you will never have a right sense of self. It will break you apart emotionally, physically, and spiritually and then your relationships will break down as well. Jesus preached the gospel and said that the kingdom of God is at hand. The gospel is about giving our allegiance to the King and demoting the status of our own independent ambitions.

And beloved, He is uncompromising about this. Again we are trying to get at the real Jesus and the real gospel. He said,

"If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." Lk. 14:26

Notice Jesus said, "If anyone," not just a few Navy seals, "anyone." By this Jesus did not mean that we are to actively hate the members of our family. In fact, He advocated care for aging parents when their adult children were finding religious ways to avoid their responsibilities to them. Also, we know that Jesus taught us to love even our enemies. So, Jesus didn't mean that we are to actively hate our parents to follow Him. He meant it *comparatively*. To follow Jesus means to make Him king and allow no other competitors to have that authority in our lives. I think that is the point with calling these first fishermen. He was insisting that they acknowledge His authority even over their careers. For all of their lives, they had been pulling fish out of the cold darkness, and now—to follow him—meant that they would be gathering up men and women out of darkness and into the light of the kingdom of God. Their careers had to take a back seat to a higher priority. A career in and of itself can't satisfy the deepest needs of your soul. It can only work for you if it is yielded to the higher purpose of serving Christ as King. So beloved, **follow the thread of the gospel**, but know this, the thread will always lead you into the kingdom of God where any other allegiance will make you miserable. No other allegiance will satisfy your soul.

Second, the thread of Jesus' gospel will lead you to a life of repentance. Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent* and believe." The first of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five theses goes like this, "*Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ... willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.*" I think he was simply recognizing how routinely we would have to work at turning away from making ourselves the gravitational pull of our lives. I may be pushing the metaphor too far, but perhaps there is a hint of this in the call to become fishers of men. When you gather fish up in the nets they have to die. There is a death involved in following Christ and the gospel. Honoring Jesus, as Lord and king of our lives can't happen without repentance or without a daily turning away from serving our own goals over His. Debby and I have discovered that not a day goes by that we don't have to do this or our selfishness will devour each other. When we got married we enormously underestimate our selfishness. We've been married 38 years and find we have to do as much repenting each day now as we did when we first got married. The thread of the gospel leads to a life of repentance.

Recently I saw a television program about a Wall Street futures trader who was attending a Christian prayer group dedicated to pray for each man's financial success. In time the man quit coming. So, the leader asked him about it. He told the leader that on the day following the prayer meeting his earnings dropped significantly. So, he couldn't afford to pray. In fact his financial condition worsened so much that he was banned from the trading floor. Now, he didn't want to make any adjustments to his lifestyle. He wanted a home in the Hamptons, private school for his three children and a membership in the country club. He heard somewhere that the dreams we have have been planted there by God and that we should claim them as our own. Well, to pay all the bills he had to do something. So, he started robbing banks! It was just so easy and quick he couldn't stop. Beloved, Jesus taught us how to pray. And he didn't say to pray for a home in the Hamptons! He said to pray this way, "Give us this day our daily bread." To repent is to turn from the self focused, self-promoting, self-serving spirit of our day, and to become people who are serving God and others. **Follow the**

thread of the gospel and that thread will lead you to a life long discipline of repentance. The thread of the gospel will lead you to a kingdom where Christ is king. It will lead you to repentance.

Finally this thread of the gospel will lead you to *faith*. Jesus said, “the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent* and believe.”

To follow Jesus means there are important things to believe. In MacDonald’s story the fairy grandmother said to Irene, “Irene, if you follow the thread it will always lead you to me, however *it may lead you in a round about way*. But don’t doubt the thread.” Why would Mark introduce Jesus first public words with this, “After John the Baptist was arrested”? The best date for the time of Mark’s gospel is somewhere between 60-70 AD. In 64 AD Rome caught on fire and suffered major damage. According to Tacitus, Nero blamed the Christians and had them crucified and made human torches out of their bodies. Mark is calling believers to a faith which may cause them to lose their lives. To follow the thread of the gospel might lead you to places that seem contradictory to your ideas of God’s care. The threads of the gospel lead you to faith in the goodness of God *even when His goodness is hidden from your eyes*. It’s not to name a better circumstance and then claim it. Can you imagine John the Baptist saying, “Oh my dream in life is to drive a Bentley and live in the Hamptons. I’ll just name and claim it.”? What a foolish mockery of those who have believed God through the most devastating moments possible.

So beloved, the threads of the gospel will lead you to faith. That thread took John, Jesus, and every apostle through the valley of the shadow of death. And they didn’t turn back; they believed the gospel of the kingdom of repentance and faith. Beloved, the thread of the gospel will lead you to believe that you are God’s child who will never leave you or forsake you, though it may seem that way. Beloved, it is a call to believe that he is working all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Believe that He has cast our sins as far as the east is from the west to be remembered no more. Believe that love of God has been poured out in your hearts by faith. Believe and lift up your eyes from where your help comes from who made heaven and earth. Believe that the Lord is your keeper who never sleeps nor slumbers. The Lord is your shade on your right hand and the sun shall not harm you by day or the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil..he will keep your going in and your going out from this time and for evermore. The thread of the gospel is a call to believe. Believe all the good and extravagant promises God has made to you in Christ and believe all the costly demands of that calling as well. Will this generation of those who say they know Christ know Him only in name...or will they know Him as King. Will this generation know Him as one who calls us to a life of repentance or just one who calls us to be forgiven? Will this generation know Him by following the thread of faith, believing in His promises and in His conditions of discipleship, or will they perceive the faith as a consumer defining the faith primarily by the fleeting benefits of the things of this world and the limitations of own ambitions.

Follow the Thread! And know that it will always lead to a Kingdom, Repentance, and Faith.