

RENEW YOUR COMMITMENT

Matthew 4:12-23

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Doug and I love to go to the movies, and we usually find that this time of year - beginning in late fall and continuing into early winter - is when the best films appear.

Three of the films we've seen in recent months keep coming back to my mind, and though they are different in many ways, the more I reflect on them, the more I see some similar threads that connect their stories.

The first movie was about Harriet Tubman.

<https://images.app.goo.gl/dYiPTpxxCmwSkCf58> If I didn't know her story was true, I'd never have believed it. She miraculously escapes slavery herself and arrives in Pennsylvania, illiterate, alone, and 29 years old. One year later, she heads back to Maryland to help her sister and two other relatives escape. When that was successful, back she went, risking her life on a total of 19 journeys, becoming a conductor on the Underground Railroad, freeing over 300 people, including her 70-year-old parents.

At one time there was a \$40,000 reward for her capture - a tremendous sum in 1856. She became known as Moses, one who frees the people. Frederick Douglass once said this of her: "Besides John Brown, I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people." And John Brown himself called her one of the bravest persons on the continent.

I was especially moved by one scene in the movie - it takes place in a nice home somewhere in the north. The Civil War has begun. There is polite conversation among abolitionist leaders who conclude that it's probably too dangerous to rescue slaves

during wartime. Harriet delivers an impassioned speech about the necessity to not give up their work. As one of the few former slaves in the room, she tells the stories of slavery in the midst of this polite gathering: beatings, torture, children ripped from their mother's arms. Her courageous risk-taking would continue.

"A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" is the feature film about Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers. <https://images.app.goo.gl/BFwTKeSi3EBnUBFJ8> It's amazing and encouraging to me that Mr. Rogers is having a comeback. After years being known mostly to children, then years being an object of parody and - frankly - ridicule, now there have been two movies in short order, one a documentary and the other starring Tom Hanks. There seems to be a hunger, in this era of rapid-fire Twitter, in this era where meanness and name calling have become accepted by many, there seems to be a hunger for the gentleness and kindness that Fred Rogers embodied. Rogers' faith life is portrayed in the movie. He kept a legal pad with names of people he said he would pray for. And he did - every morning between 5 and 5:15, he'd get on his knees with his prayer list in front of him.

As an ordained minister, he saw his television show as his ministry; he considered it holy ground. He didn't mention God or faith explicitly, because he knew that those words might begin to exclude people. Religious language is used in so many ways, including to divide people, including - sometimes - as a weapon. So Rogers avoided religious language and instead acted his faith, always, as much as he possibly could. In an interview last year before the movie was released, his widow Joanne said, "Fred worked very hard at being the person that he was."

The most recent movie we saw was entitled, "Dark Waters."

<https://images.app.goo.gl/rLDuKTy2AnuoN7MBA> Its hero is a real-life attorney, who is still practicing at a well-known law firm in Cincinnati. Rob Bilott was a corporate attorney whose beloved grandmother lived her whole life in Parkersburg, West Virginia. One day a farmer from outside Parkersburg shows up, unannounced and uninvited, at Bilott's office, carrying a box full of video tapes. "I want you to watch these," the farmer says. "I know your grandmother, and you need to know what's going on in her home town." The persistence of the farmer, combined with Bilott's curiosity cause the attorney to watch the videos which tell a story of the poisoning of an entire community's water supply by one of America's most well-known chemical companies. Bilott eventually decides to take on this case. When he shows his law partners that this company's deliberate practices are leading to the death of animals, to alarming cancer rates in people, and to birth defects, they agree that the firm should support his work. He spends hours on the floor of the workroom going through file box after file box, feverishly writing notes. The end result is that the practices have been stopped, many people have received compensation, and he is still fighting other similar cases, working towards a world where people's health is valued more than the corporate bottom line.

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What these stories all have in common is the simple, powerful message that one person can make a difference. In each case, the individual is motivated by a sense of call, an inner voice to which they listened and which they followed. What is that inner voice that propelled Fred Rogers to be 100% himself, regardless of how many people made fun of him? He listened to something - or someone - who told him that children

have value, that their feelings matter. He showed on television his white feet next to his friend's black feet in a wading pool when segregation was raging in this country. He talked to children about divorce and death when no one else would.

What gave Harriet Tubman the courage to return to the south, when she couldn't even read? Rob Bilott risked his career, his ability to provide for his family, and his own health. He was David, facing a Goliath of an American company with all of its resources. What kept him going?

What do you call it when you know - in your gut, in your heart, that you're supposed to do something? You might call it the voice of God telling you to spend more time with an aging parent - that nothing is more important at this moment...you might call it your inner wisdom telling you that you need to volunteer at the food bank or the homeless shelter, or that this is the time for you to become more politically active. We all get these nudges sometime. All of a sudden you can't stop thinking about the single parent who lives on your street and wondering how you can be helpful to that family...the teacher notices the student who needs extra attention...Your own parents have died but you remember how much they appreciated your visits and you somehow realize that you could make a visit to that same care facility on your way home from work once a month, and that's exactly what you should be doing.

When we read the story of the call of the first four disciples, we are struck by the immediate response of Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John. It seems to happen so casually - Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He sees two brothers throwing their fishing nets into the water, and he says, "Come, follow me." "Right away they left their tents and followed him." They walk along and run into two other brothers

on a boat with their father, repairing nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Could it have really happened this way? One biblical scholar says that this is meant to be a representative story, an example of the way that Jesus called all of his followers. This story says something to us about the power of Jesus' personality and the way he had of attracting people to him. But it also says something to us about these four disciples. I have to believe that they had been listening to their inner voices long before Jesus walked along the seashore. Fishing, after all, leaves a lot of time for reflection and introspection. The quiet of the late nights and the early mornings lend itself to deeper thought. I'm convinced that there was a readiness in the souls of these four men, a readiness for change. I'm convinced there was was St. Augustine described as a restlessness in them. He famously wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God." Perhaps they'd been waiting all their lives to hear the voice of Jesus without even knowing it.

I sense a restlessness within many people I talk to these days. We are anxious and troubled about the state of our world, and we don't know what we can do about it. We obey the messages of the marketplace when commercials tell us how to be happier and more content. We join the gym, invest money, organize our closets. And all of these things are good, but none of them change our inner selves.

God calls each of us to a life of ministry and service. It may look very different for each of us, and it will change shape at various stages of our lives. Here's how you know if what you are doing is that which God has called you to do - there are a few criteria: **DINAH, PLEASE USE THE POWERPOINT I SENT YOU HERE.**

1. It will always involve an element of risk. For most of us, not the kind of risk that Harriet Tubman took, not the kinds of risks that Nazi resisters took, or those who hid Jewish children in villages in France. But we might risk some comfort, we might risk some embarrassment; we'll have to give up some of our time and some of our money.

2. It will probably not be anything that feeds your ego. Working for God is most often working behind the scenes, in the margins, in work that leads us towards joy and humility, rather than headlines and accolades. Most of God's servants don't get movies made about them!

3. It will be work that someone else needs. We don't get involved because it will make us feel better or because we presume we know another person's needs. We get involved because we've done our homework, we've asked questions, and we know that what we are doing will help bring about a sense of justice and dignity to another person. I will never forget a day I spent in eastern India with the head of a community health organization. He drove us from one tiny village to another showing us their work in this extremely rural region. He explains that every time he approaches a village, he begins by asking for a meeting with its community leaders. He explains to them the kind of services they offer, and then he asks them to talk it over with their community members and let him know what services they're interested in. There was no presuming, no judging, no barreling in with immunizations and antibiotics and education. It was an atmosphere of deep respect.

The first step in the whole process of discipleship is listening to our inner voice. That requires finding a way to be silent long enough to listen. Trust that God has a purpose for your life, no matter what age or stage, no matter how busy you may be or

how old you may feel. Trust that God will speak that purpose to you, once you renew your commitment to listening, to paying attention, and then to following.

Scientists who study the behavior of seals in Antarctica report this behavior.

<https://images.app.goo.gl/84L9Etap2diGuHNI6> After giving birth, the mother - who is now famished - abandons her seal pup on the shore to go feed in the rich waters off the coast. After feeding, she will return to a different part of the beach and begin to call for her any. Other mothers had done the same, and all had returned at a similar time. Following each other's sounds and scents, all of the mothers and pups found their way back to each other. Researchers explain that, from the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted in the mother's memory, and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup's memory.

Somewhere deep within each of us is a memory of God's voice. Can you hear it? Will you try to listen?