

Immediately!

Slightly adapted from “The Eagle Soars,” part of *Forged in the Stars* by Jay O’Callahan
with additional notes used with the gracious permission of J.C. High Eagle
Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND
Mark 1:14-20
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Today, Mark tells us the story of Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John.
They respond to the call immediately.
Just like those four disciples,
most people hear God’s call in their life as a voice.
Yet we are not always awake and prepared
to immediately say “yes!” to that call.
Being awake and prepared is the goal of our spiritual life,
so today I want to tell you the story of a man who said “yes” to God.

One of the wonderful aspects of the people who work for NASA
is that they are passionate about what they do.
They truly love working there.
Like many of us who first had a sense of our unique passion and call when we were children,
many of the NASA scientists dreamed of doing space exploration
when they were children.

On Christmas Day, 2009, I heard Jay O’Callahan tell a story about one man’s call from God.
This story is part of *Forged in the Stars*,
O’Callahan’s tribute for the 50th anniversary of NASA.
And I think it challenges us to be like
Simon and Andrew and James and John
who heard a call from God through Jesus
and immediately followed it.

In 1948, in a working-class neighborhood in Oklahoma City,
a five-year-old boy ran into the kitchen.
He said, ‘Mom, I heard a voice.’
‘A voice?’
‘Yes, it was coming from way up by the sun,
the voice said I was going to have something to do with getting people to the Moon!’
And she said, ‘That’s a vision.’
And she said that because they were Cherokee and Osage.
She said, ‘You’re going to have to work for the vision.’
Working meant being good at mathematics and physics.
The boy’s name was J. C. High Eagle – that was his Cherokee name.
His name in the white world was Jerry Elliot.
J.C. did well in high school.

Then, in 1961, J.C. High Eagle went to the University of Oklahoma.
He was 18, and he was excited about physics and mathematics.
He found a lot of students didn't want him there.

'What's the Indian kid doin' here?'

Their hostility made it a difficult time for him.

A lot of professors didn't want him.

'You're a fine young man,
but see nature hands out gifts indiscriminately,
and your people don't have, well, the mental wherewithal
to be engineers, scientists.

You're wasting your time.'

Their assumptions made it a difficult time for him.

He was hurt by what they said and how they treated him,
but he had a vision,

he had a call from the Creator,
and he stayed with it.

He did very well in his college classes.

Later, he would say:

"Diversity teaches to look beyond the superficialities of human differences,
and to measure what really matters,
namely, the 'content of human character, not its color.'

"Only then will the nation and other nations as well prosper;
only then, will they be strong;
and only then will their science and human conditions find the common ground."

In 1966, J.C. High Eagle decided to go to graduate school to study physics and mathematics.

But, there was a problem: there was no money.

His stepfather had died, and his mother was working but not earning much.

So, J.C. went down to the police station in Norman, Oklahoma.

'I want to be a policeman,' he said.

They gave him a test.

He scored as high as anyone has ever scored.

He became a full-time policeman and he was soon promoted to deputy sheriff.

That meant he could take two courses a semester.

One class he took was Electrical Engineering.

He wore his uniform with a loaded gun to class,
but that was okay because it was Oklahoma.

One day, his mother called J.C. and said, 'There's a telegram.'

He said, 'Open it, Mom.'

She said, 'It's from the army – you have to report for your draft physical.'

He passed.

She called J.C. again. 'Another telegram for you.'

He said, 'Open it.'

She said, 'You've got to report to boot camp in 15 days to go to Vietnam.

Call your grandfather.'

So J.C. called his grandfather at his wheat farm.

‘Granddad, this is J.C. I’m going to boot camp in 15 days.’
His grandfather was a wise man.
Even so, J.C. was surprised when he said, ‘They won’t take you.’
J.C. replied, ‘Oh, no. I got the piece of paper.’
His grandfather said, ‘I don’t believe in paper.
They won’t take you.
Had a hard time getting the calf born last night.
I had to hitch the tractor up!’
J.C. said, ‘Granddad, I’m going to boot camp.’
His grandfather said, ‘They won’t take you. Let me tell you about last night!’
His grandfather went on and on.
J.C. was furious. He hung up, and called his mom.
He said, ‘He didn’t listen to me; he said they wouldn’t take me.
Went on and on about a calf.’
His mother said, ‘He’s my father. I’m with him.’
J.C. was furious; the two people he trusted didn’t listen to him!

15 days, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10 days until J.C. had to report.
On that day J.C. encountered an angry drunk.
The man said to J.C., ‘If you arrest me, I will kill you.’
He arrested the man.
It turned out the man had been released from Macalister
after serving 30 years for killing a man.
He paid his fine, and he went free.

Nine days, eight days until J.C. had to report.
On the eighth day a letter came to the police station.
The drunk man was going to get J.C. High Eagle.
So, J.C. was looking over his shoulder.

Seven days, six days.
On the sixth day when he finished Electrical Engineering class at 11 o’clock,
J.C. walked down the corridor
and saw several students waiting outside the Dean’s office.
There was a sign: ‘NASA interviewing today!’
J.C. got in line and asked the student ahead of him,
‘What do you need to have for the interview?’
The student said,
‘You’ve got to have a NASA application,
a government application,
and your resume.
They won’t talk to you if you don’t.’
J.C. knew he didn’t have time to get that.
He waited in line, and then it was his turn.
The NASA man was packing his briefcase.
He looked at the police officer standing before him.
‘What can I do for you, officer?’
J.C. said, ‘I want to put people on the moon.’

The man from NASA looked at him.
J.C. said, 'I'm working my way through graduate school.'
The man from NASA said,
 'Well, listen; I got a plane to catch.
 Write down your phone number there, and your name.
 Don't call us, we'll call you.'
Then the man from NASA left.

Five days, four days until J.C. had to report.
His mother called him.

 'J.C., a man, Bernie Goodwin, from NASA, called.
 He said he talked to you.
 You ought to call him right now.
 Here's the phone number.'

J.C. made the call: 'Mr. Goodwin, this is J.C. High Eagle.'

Mr. Goodwin said, 'You're a bright young man.
I checked on your record, you're brilliant.
You got fire.
We need people like you.
In fact, we want you to work for us.
Monday morning, Manned Space Center, Houston.'

J.C. said, 'I can't.'

Mr. Goodwin asked, 'Why? The draft?'

'Yes, sir, the draft.'

Mr. Goodwin replied,

 'Well, you're a policeman; you know possession is nine tenths of the law.
 You come, we possess you.
 Who runs the draft there?'

J.C. said, 'We have a colonel.'

Mr. Goodwin said, 'Well, we have a general.'

 Our general will talk to your colonel.
 Monday morning, Manned Space Center.'

J.C. High Eagle replied, 'Yes, sir!'

J.C. told his mother.

She said, 'Call your grandfather.'

So J.C. called his grandfather.

His grandfather said, 'I told you they wouldn't take you.'

J.C. High Eagle got his guitar, borrowed his mom's car and headed to Houston.

All the time he's thinking,

 'Granddad must have negotiated a different fate for me with the Creator.'

At nine o'clock that Monday morning J.C. was hired

 as a Flight Mission Operations Engineer
 at NASA's Johnson Space Center.

A few weeks went by.

One day, Chris Craft, who become famous as the flight director for NASA,

came over with a big cigar and said to J.C., ‘How do you like it here, son?’
J.C. replied, ‘I love it! I love the responsibility, but one thing, sir ...’
‘What’s that?’
J.C. said, ‘I’m used to reading books to learn what I should – what should I read?’
‘Son, we don’t read books here, we write them.’

Soon enough, J.C. High Eagle was writing the Aegena Systems Handbook.
And he was one of the engineers in the Flight Control Center for all the Apollo missions,
for the astronauts landing on the moon.
He was in charge of the landing coordinates
and for bringing the astronauts back to earth from space.
He had lived into his vision, his call.
Science, for J.C. was a way to live out and live into his faith,
As he says,
“The end results of science are not the end of faith in a Supreme Creator,
but an increase in [faith].”

But there’s more to the story.

It was 1970.

Apollo 13 was scheduled to lift off in a few days.

J.C. High Eagle received a jury duty notice.

He went down to Houston.

Nobody got out of jury duty with Judge Singleton.

A pregnant woman tried to be excused, ‘Your honor, I’m pregnant.’

The judge said, ‘The baby will wait.’

The judge asked J.C.: ‘And what’s your excuse?’

‘It’s not an excuse, your honor.

I’m the lead Retrofire Officer for Apollo 13.

‘What’s a Retrofire Officer?’

‘I calculate the reentry of the command module.

If it’s too steep, they burn up.

If it’s too shallow, they flip off, they do not come back.’

‘I don’t usually make exceptions.

I’ll make an exception in this case if you do me a favor.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Bring them back alive.’

‘Yes, sir!’

Apollo 13 lifted off.

It went up and up, it was two hundred thousand miles up. Everything was fine.

J.C. High Eagle finished his shift at Flight Control Center.

He went out, got in his car, and turned on the radio.

There had been an accident in space.

J.C. ran into Flight Control Center.

Men were running around.

Some men were crying.

Something very serious had happened.

They were not yet sure what it was.
And then somebody said, 'They've got to abort the mission.'
'No!' said J.C.
 'No! Don't abort!'
J.C. was afraid the engine might have been damaged.
 He knew that if the astronauts did a u-turn in the command module,
 the engine wouldn't be able get them back.
J.C. said, 'No, you've got to slingshot them around the moon!
 Use the gravity of the moon to help slingshot them back to the earth.'

After Apollo 13 returned, J.C. was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom,
 the highest civilian honor in our country,
 for his calculations of the return trajectory
 that allowed the struggling Apollo 13 capsule
 to make its way safely back into Earth's atmosphere.

Over the years, J.C. was involved in many groundbreaking events at NASA,
 including the Apollo – Soyuz Test Project which took place in July of 1975.
 This historic mission brought an end to tensions
 between the Soviet Union and the United States
 and set the groundwork for the Mir International Space Station as it exists today.

And so it was that J.C. High Eagle helped get people to the moon
 and he helped them get back to Earth.
 He lived into the calling he first heard in that voice –
 a calling that came from the Creator.
 As he says,
 "Truly, the credit belongs to God,
 for that is where the inspiration came originally."

These days,
 J.C. High Eagle works as a musician and inspirational speaker
 helping to connect people with God and their call.

This morning, both the Gospel of Mark and J.C. High Eagle
 remind us that each one of us is called,
 and we need to be awake and prepared to take action immediately
 when God calls us to take further steps along that journey.

As J.C. High Eagle reminds us today,
 Visions are messages
 from the Great Spirit.
 One person's vision may not be that
 of another's.
 To have a vision, one must be
 prepared to receive it,
 and when it comes,
 to accept it
 Aho. Amen.

Sources:

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Quotations used with the gracious permission of J.C. High Eagle
For more information go to <http://www.jchigheagle.com>

Texts:

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.