

“Gone Fishing”

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Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested,
 Jesus came to Galilee,
 proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

16 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.

17 And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

WHY DID THEY FOLLOW?

Why did the disciples leave their job and their family in order to follow Jesus?

Mark doesn't seem to give us the why.
 He just gives us the facts.

Jesus calls.
 The disciples follow.

Just that simple ... and just that puzzling.

Why would the disciples sacrifice so much based on so little information?

Simon and Andrew were in the process of catching fish ... casting their nets into the sea.

Jesus tells them,

“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

“Immediately, they drop their nets and follow.”

The call of James and John is even more dramatic.

They are mending their nets preparing to fish.

“Immediately” Jesus calls them.

And what do James and John do?

They leave their father, Zebedee in the boat with the hired hands

... while they follow Jesus.

But, why were they willing to do that?

Why were they willing to drop everything and follow Jesus?

That's been the source of much speculation over the years.

Commentators have talked about the power of Jesus' presence.

Sort of like that song,

“Jesus, Jesus

... there's just something about that name.”

Maybe that was true.

We don't know for sure.

There certainly was something about Jesus.

He was, after all, the Son of God.

THE KINGDOM COMES

But, I believe there was more to their response than just Jesus' charisma.

I think they followed because of Jesus' message.

Notice that the call of the disciples is preceded by the arrest of John the Baptist,
and then a summary of what Jesus preached.

Jesus' ministry begins just as John's ministry ends.
That's important.

We know that John was a very popular leader.
And his arrest must have been very disheartening to his followers.

But, it also created the need for a new leader.

John preached that the kingdom of God was at hand.

The Messiah would soon come,
And John said that he must decrease so that the ministry of the Messiah
could increase.

So the arrest of John also created a sense of expectation
... as well as a sense of anxiety.
What did it mean?
Is now the time that the Messiah will come?

And so into this time of expectation and fear,
Jesus comes to Galilee.

And what does Jesus preach?

The time is fulfilled.
This is it.
This is what you have been waiting for.

"The kingdom of God has come near.
Repent and believe the good news."

IMMEDIATELY

There's a sense of urgency in this message.

In Mark's gospel that urgency is signified by the word "immediately".
He uses that word throughout the gospel.

For example in today's lesson, Jesus "immediately" calls the disciples,
and "immediately" they follow him.

If I were writing a book on the gospel of Mark that's what I would entitle it
"Immediately".

That's how Mark saw the gospel.

It wasn't just any story.

It was the story.

Mark doesn't keep us in suspense.

He tells us in the very first verse.

His gospel is about Jesus, the Son of God.

This story was so important that all other stories take a back seat.

What would it be like to tell a story with such urgency?

This past week I think we had an example of what that sense of urgency
might be like.

The people in Hawaii had a terrible scare.

A local civil defense official inadvertently made the wrong announcement.

And for a few terrifying moments,

the people of Hawaii believed that a nuclear warhead was headed their
way.

What do you do when you think that your world is likely coming to an end?

There is no place to hide.

There is nothing that you can do.

Many called family members and told them that they loved them.

Some took to Twitter to see if the alarm was real.

Some panicked and did irrational things ...

... like lowering their children down a manhole cover in a desperate attempt
to save them.

What would you do?

All of us, at least for a fleeting moment, would look at things much differently.

That's how it was when Jesus came to Galilee.

If you believed the kingdom of God was coming near ...then you would be more likely to repent,
to go in a different direction,
to change your mind about what is most important.

But, unlike the news that Hawaii got this past week,
the news that Jesus preached was good news.
It was gospel.

God had come near in Christ.
But, his purpose was not to condemn the world.
His purpose was not to destroy the world.

His purpose was to save the world.

The coming of the Messiah made it possible for the people to have a new life.

They could leave the old way of life behind.
Because in Jesus the kingdom of God had come near.

And that's why Simon and Andrew could drop their nets and follow Jesus right away.

That's why James and John could do the same.
That's why they unceremoniously left the family fishing business to father Zebedee and the hired hands.

They believed the good news.
They believed it so strongly that they left everything to follow Jesus.

They believed that the heavens had been ripped open.
They believed Spirit of God had descended like a dove.
And they believed that that Spirit now resided on Jesus.
(Mark 1:9-11)

No wonder they left everything to follow Jesus.
What could be more important?

The chasm between heaven and earth had been breached.
And the Spirit of God in Christ was about to unleash a new creation.

THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS

It's been a long time since Jesus appeared in Galilee.
It's been a long time since Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was near.

For some of us, Mark's "immediately" no longer creates a sense of urgency.
And the call to repentance seems more like bad news than good news.

We don't want to go in a new direction.
Truth be told, we would like to stay just where we are.

We don't want to leave home and follow Jesus.

I wonder.
What might make us drop everything and pursue a new life?
Is there any news so good that we would leave everything in order to pursue it?

Many of us have made a big decision at one time or another.

The promise of a job takes us to new town.
Marriage is proposed,
and we're off in a totally new direction.

We leave home for school or the service.
We start our own business.

All of these decisions require that we leave what we know for an uncertain future.

When the moment of decision comes,
we can't imagine what will happen.

But, we go.

We take a leap of faith.
We don't know all the details,
but we go anyway.

We say "yes" and then we see what happens.

I think that we should look at the decision to follow Jesus much like these other life changing decisions.

Yes, we don't know what the future holds.
But, (as the saying goes) we do know who holds the future.

We trust in the goodness of the One who calls us.

The decision to take a leap of faith can make a big difference in our future.
But, that leap of faith also entails great sacrifice as well.

That marriage proposal is followed by times of great joy and sorrow.
That new business requires us to work long hours and make great sacrifices.

That commitment to college requires dedication, study, and money.
Lots of money these days!

Anything worthwhile comes with a cost.
And that's true when it comes to following Jesus.

THE REWARD OF FOLLOWING JESUS

The disciples certainly found this to be true.

Later in Mark's gospel Jesus tells his disciples that following him will require them to travel a path that is narrow and treacherous. They will be required to sacrifice everything ... even their own life.

This prompts Peter to say,
"Look, we have left everything to follow you." (Mark 10:28)

In other words,
 “Lord, we’ve left our family and friends.
 We’ve left our jobs.

What more do you want?
 What more can we give?”

I must admit that I identify more with Peter’s frustration than with this initial call story.

I tend to think more about what I have given up than what might be gained by following Jesus.

Giving up everything
 ... even for the kingdom of God sometimes seems like a lot to ask.
 But, Jesus puts some of Peter’s fears to rest by saying,

“Don’t worry.
 Yes, you will face persecution.
 There will be a cost to following me.
 But, you won’t be alone.

Your family is going to expand dramatically.
 You’re going to have more mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters than you can imagine.
 You’re going to have a new home and a new way of life.” (See Mark 10:29-31)

What was Jesus talking about?
 I think he was talking about the church, the community of faith.

This community is formed and lives by the principles of this new kingdom.

THE CALL TO GO FISH

In our lesson for today, the disciples are not only asked to leave everything and follow Jesus.
 They are also asked to learn a new trade.

Instead of fishing for fish, now they are going to learn how to fish for people.

What does it mean to fish for people?

I think the meaning of this phrase is fleshed out in the rest of Jesus' ministry.

I like the way the ministry of Jesus is summarized in one of our confessions, A Brief Statement of Faith.

In that Confession we read that Jesus "preached good news to the poor and release to the captives".

He healed the sick, bound up the brokenhearted, ate with outcasts, forgave sinners, and called on all to repent and believe the gospel."

When people think of kingdoms they think of the high and the mighty.

For example, in Jesus' day, King Herod sought to prove his worth by building a great Temple. He also built great cities and monuments.

But, what Herod didn't do was care for his people.

In fact paranoid old King Herod was a danger not only to his people but also to his own family.

And, of course, it was Herod who had John the Baptist killed because he dared to preach an inconvenient word of truth to power.

But, Herod's action did not stop the kingdom of God from coming. His murderous ways provided the occasion for the start of Jesus' ministry.

So, when John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee preaching the good news.

Despite the treachery of King Herod, the kingdom of God was still on the way

In fact, Jesus said, "it's here".

The time is fulfilled.

The kingdom comes.

God's will is done.

But, this kingdom is a lot different from the kingdoms of the world.

In contrast to Herod's kingdom,
the kingdom of God was not about constructing great buildings or monumental cities.

The kingdom of God was about repentance.
The kingdom of God was about taking the world in a totally different direction.

The kingdom of God was about caring for the needs of people instead of trying to impress the rich and powerful.

The kingdom did not begin in the palace
but in all those dark and lonely places where people struggled to survive.

If you want to fish for people, you tend to their needs ... both physical and spiritual.

Like Jesus you teach by word and deed.

THE CONFLICT CONTINUES

The coming of God's kingdom in Jesus was born in conflict.
It began with the arrest of John.

And as most of us know, the conflict will continue.
And it will end with a cross.

(At least the powers that be thought that was the end. The pesky kingdom of God has a habit of coming back to life.)

Right now we're in the season of Epiphany.

But, it won't be long before we're once again in the season of Lent.

Once again we'll take that long road that leads to the cross.

It's important that we take that road to the cross every year because that road is one we travel with Jesus still.

The kingdom of God faced persecution from the powers that be at every turn.

John faced that persecution.
Jesus faced that persecution.
The early church faced that persecution.

And the story of conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world continues even today.

Treacherous King Herod still lives in our world.
And he along with the Emperor still tries to crucify the kingdom of God.

These Herods and the Caesars of this world still try to redefine faith in such a way that it becomes an arm of the state.

The Romans did this as they fought their wars under the sign of the cross.
The Nazis tried to do this during World War II.

And the latest example comes from Russia.

It seems that Vladimir Putin can't miss any opportunity to bare his chest.
And so he participated in an ancient Russian Orthodox tradition.

He took a plunge in icy waters to celebrate Epiphany.
With priests looking on in full regalia,
he crossed himself before submerging for a few seconds.

Really?
This KGB agent is crossing himself?
The kingdom of God is still under attack.
Once again the truth of the God is being subverted by the lies of Herod.

In China there was an even more direct attack on the church.

A huge church was razed to the ground
because they dared to teach a religion that was not "authorized" by the state.

The powers that be want the faith to be crucified, dead and buried ... or least watered down to the point that it doesn't mean a thing.

But, don't count on it.

As they used to say in the early church,
"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Arresting John will not throttle the truth.
Crucifying Jesus will not stop the kingdom from coming.

That was true then.
And it's true now.

The battle for the kingdom of God goes on in our country as well.

Religious leaders are often all too eager to back those in power ...

... even though those in power do not speak the truth and make their living on the backs of those that are most vulnerable.

So, how do we follow Jesus?
How do we go in a different direction in a world that seems intent on following Herod in all his incarnations?

We go fishing.
We go fishing for men and women.

Like Jesus, in word and deed, we preach good news,

... not to the high and mighty,
but to those who find themselves on the bottom.

We preach the good news that the world doesn't have to go to hell.

The world can go to heaven.
The kingdom can come
... on earth as well as in heaven.

We fight for those who have no power, no influence, no hope.

We will give up a lot if we do this.
Herod and Caesar always know when their power is being challenged.

And the Empire will strike back.

But, we will gain much more than we lose.
We will gain brothers and sisters all over the world

... and a hope that cannot be crucified.

So, let's drop everything
... and go fishing with Jesus.

Amen.