

**Please take a sermon prior to the worship service only if necessary due to hearing impairment. After the service, sermons are available for any who wish to take one.**

“Drop Everything!”  
Mark 1: 14-20 & Jonah 3: 1-5, 10  
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Before we turn to the Gospel lesson today, let's look at the passage from Jonah. Just as a recap, to put this passage in context, God called Jonah to proclaim to Ninevah, a violent and heathen super-power, that they would be at the receiving end of God's wrath. Jonah, like so many prophets, was reluctant to do God's bidding. But Jonah, probably the worst prophet in the Bible, is not only reluctant, but it runs away. He gets on a boat going in the opposite direction. But God sends a storm, Jonah fesses up to the crew that the storm because of him and overboard he goes. Which is how he ends up in the belly of a big fish. But then God has the fish spit him up. Eventually, God gives Jonah another opportunity to do his job and this time he goes. He marches throughout the enemy mega-metropolis proclaiming, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the amazing part is that the king and the people of Nineveh actually believe him. They drop everything. They repent, they fast, they put on sackcloth. And then God spares them. And then Jonah is mad that they repented and were saved.

Now back to Mark. We're still at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. But what is a gospel anyway? Mark is widely considered to be the first gospel written and therefore, the author of Mark actually created a new genre: the gospel. In fact, the name “gospel” for this genre of writing comes from the opening of Mark's gospel, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Gospel, as you know, means the “good news,” a proclamation of good news, as in a battle when a messenger would bring good news of victory from the front lines. In this case, the good news regards God's victory, a new way of being, promise of a new, life-affirming, God-filled future. A gospel is not a biography or history, though it does have elements of both. A gospel is a proclamation, similar to a sermon in that its purpose is to persuade and inspire change. It is a story that gives hope to the listeners, hope for a future that, without the good news, would not have been possible for them.

But our passage today doesn't start in a very hopeful place. “Now after John was arrested...” Just before this, John baptized Jesus, then Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit where he spent forty days in the desert being tempted by Satan and waited on by angels and then the next thing we know, John has been arrested. Being a prophet can be dangerous work. But Mark's telling us

that John has been arrested, and later about his execution, is important. Here, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry we are given foreshadowing of what is to come: Jesus, like John, will be arrested and executed.

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” John, despite his eccentricities, had been a well-known, popular prophet. He had many followers. John gave hope to the downtrodden. Hope of one greater than he who was to come. If John had given the people hope, surely his arrest came as a painful disappointment. The people had their hopes up with John and when he was arrested, those hopes were dashed. But then Jesus comes along preaching a similar message of repentance to the same target audience—the downtrodden. Jesus came out of the wilderness preaching hope to the hopeless.

It's worth noting here that our translation here, as one scholar notes, “Jesus is not just ‘saying’ (NRSV) the announcement we now hear, but ‘*proclaiming*’ (Greek, *karusso*) the good news of the kingdom.... the NRSV translation misses the power of the Greek verb ‘to proclaim’ by translating with the word ‘saying.’ Jesus' words are proclaiming that God's time is not only near but is here. God's kingly reign and rule is breaking in presently in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth (1:14).”<sup>1</sup>

So what is Jesus proclaiming? “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” These are Jesus first words in the Gospel of Mark. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” This verse is inherently important because it contains the first words Jesus speaks in this gospel. Additionally, this verse is the summary of the essence of the Gospel of Mark: Jesus is proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent,—that is, return to God's way—and believe in the good news—that is, accept the message.

This Kingdom of God is not a place, it's not heaven as we may imagine. Rather than “kingdom,” “reign” or “realm” might be more accurate. Unlike a worldly kingdom, God's Reign is not limited by boundaries of geography, space or time. The Reign of God means that God is in charge, not Caesar, not Herod, not any other empire or leader. The Reign of God represents a new reality. A welcome message of hope to a people under the heel of Rome and Rome's Jewish cronies.

It's hard to understand how, if Jesus was proclaiming the Reign of God is near, and elsewhere even says it's here already, how is it that two thousand years later, the Reign of God seems as far away and dreamlike as heaven? It's hard to understand the “already” and “not yet” of the Reign of God. One way to think of it is as the old reality and God's Reign overlapping. As one scholar explains, in

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<sup>1</sup> Paul S. Berge, “Commentary on Gospel” Lectionary for January 22, 2012, Third Sunday after Epiphany Mark 1:14-20, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4&alt=1>

the world of Mark's gospel, "The present age is under the control of Satan; God will act soon to bring about the new age of the rule of God. With the beginning of his public ministry, the Markan Jesus inaugurates God's rule (Mk 1.14-15) and with it the blessings of that rule: healings, feedings, and new community. In Mark, [and I would add, in our time] the present is a time of overlapping of ages. The new age or rule of God has indeed begun, and Jesus' power over sickness and nature reveals its present reality. However, the powers of the old age are not yet fully defeated, and until that age ends its adherents will struggle to defeat those who participate in the new age."<sup>2</sup>

The dawning of this new age calls for a response on our part. The response Jesus calls us to is to repent and believe the good news. Repent! Repentance isn't about simply confessing our sins. It isn't about feeling bad or guilty about stuff we've done or not done, though certainly those can be elements of repentance. But more importantly, repentance is a change of mind. The call to repentance is a wake up call. Wake up to a new way of seeing things. A new way of being. Be persuaded of a new way of looking at things.

Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom of God is near and the invitation to repent and believe is an offer of hope in the face of hopelessness. The situation might seem hopeless, but with God, there is always good news, as Mark emphasizes by using the phrase twice in this one sentence.

"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." Hard to believe, isn't it? What is so compelling about fishing for people? The translation of Jesus' statement, "I will make you fish for people" sounds like another task to be done. We might wonder, why would these men want to take on another task? A better translation might be "I will make you to become fishers of people." It's not about Jesus forcing jobs upon the disciples like a taskmaster. It's about Jesus transforming the disciples, and us, into something new.

What could have possibly been so compelling about Jesus, or about fishing for people that would make Simon, Andrew, James and John drop everything to follow him? Not only do they drop everything, with no questions or discussion as Mark tells it, but they do so *immediately*, apparently without hesitation. How many of us would do as much? As one pastor notes, we're more likely to "drag our feet, weigh pros and cons and consider the implications for family and other

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<sup>2</sup> Joanna Dewey, "Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take Up Their Cross': Feminist Reading of Mark 8.34 in Mark's Social and Narrative World," *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 31.

commitments. Then there are our nets—they're so full of things we find difficult to leave behind that we attempt to take them along, sure that we'll need some of that old baggage on our new journey with Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

But these fishermen drop everything and follow. Immediately. "Immediately" is a much used, favorite word in Mark. Used about forty times in the short sixteen chapters of the gospel. It conveys urgency. It seems that Jesus has invited them in a way, in a time, that they are hungry for the good news. Apparently, these men have a sense of urgency bringing them to drop everything and follow Jesus. Leave the only occupation they've ever known for an unknown future. Jesus doesn't even promise them anything, he simply gives them an invitation to serve, with no promise of reward. Come to think of it, these guys are pretty much the opposite of Jonah. Whereas God called Jonah to go one way and he ran as fast as he could in the other direction, here Jesus says, "follow me," and they drop everything to do so.

It's been suggested that perhaps Jesus already knew these guys, after all, it was a small region and Jesus had been proclaiming the gospel before this. Perhaps he'd spent time with them and they knew what he was about. Perhaps he had talked to them about becoming itinerant preachers before and now he's saying, "ok, now is the time."

Regardless of whether they knew him or whether he was a stranger, to drop everything and follow him required a great deal of risk, trust and faith. But also, they must have reached a breaking point. A point where they simply couldn't live the old way any more. A point where their current situation was so bad that they were willing to drop everything to change it entirely. To let Jesus transform them.

The question for you and for me is: will you let Jesus transform you? Will you drop everything, leave your nets behind and follow Jesus, proclaim the good news of the Reign of God, become fishers of people? Becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime. A moment in which we commit our lives to God. A lifetime of fulfilling that commitment. Remember Nineveh in Jonah's story. God's message to Nineveh wasn't to reform. Jonah didn't tell them, you better repent, fast and put on sackcloth. Jonah's message was, game over. But Nineveh responds by being "daring, imaginative, and inventive in moving beyond the prophetic word itself to fashion an uninvited response of repentance."<sup>4</sup> Will you and I respond to the proclamation of the good news in ways that are daring, imaginative and inventive? Will we repent, opening ourselves up to a new way of being? A new way of seeing things? What are your "nets" keeping you from responding to the good news of the God's Reign as the Ninevites and the disciples did?

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<sup>3</sup> Cynthia D. Weems, "Living By The Word," *The Christian Century*, January 11, 2012, Vol. 129, No. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Walter Brueggemann, et al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year B* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 116.