

The Faith to Follow
Mark 1:14-20
3rd Sunday in the Epiphany
January 24, 2021

The lectionary this week brings us to Jesus and the calling of the disciples through the eyes of Mark. 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.

Whoa! What's going on here? It seems irrational. Irresponsible. Are they following a cult leader? A charlatan? What made Jesus different? What did he see in these would-be disciples?

If it were me, I would have stayed in the fishing boat or debated about what to do until Jesus was just a speck on the horizon. But they didn't ask questions. That's what always astonishes and terrifies me about this story from Mark. Jesus shows up by the Sea of Galilee, calls out to Simon Peter and Andrew, tells them he's going to upend their lives and give them a new vocation, then commands them to follow him without a backward glance or a thought for the family fishing business.

Mark records no questions asked by either of the fishermen. In the space of one more sentence, Jesus issues the same call to James and John with the same results. In a flash they're out of the boat and following Jesus.

I'm sure I'd blurt out, "Who are you and where are you going?" "What's your plan and how do I fit into it?" "What happens to my family business and all the people it supports?" "Why are you calling *me*?" And, "Once we catch these people you're teaching us to fish for, what are we supposed to do with them?"

There's no business plan, no evangelism outreach strategy, no job description, no interview and no time to consider the pros and cons of the offer—just an itinerant preacher who appears on shore, shouts an invitation and walks on.

I don't think we are adequately able to grasp today the impact of this story. This is a dramatic and compelling beginning to the gospel, to say the least. Mark

hits the ground running. Mark's gospel is the earliest of the gospels -- written around 65 A.D. He's a man of few words. No extra details or explanations from Mark. Events taking place over days and weeks are sometimes telescoped into one sentence with Mark. There is a sense of urgency for Mark as he proclaims the gospel about Jesus and the kingdom of God. Hesitate and you might miss him. Wait until tomorrow to check out Jesus, and you might be too late.

Mark's favorite word is "*immediately*," just in case you haven't noticed already in the beginning of the first chapter. Patience is not a virtue for Mark! There is no time to waste in as he describes the unfolding of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus always seems to be going on ahead of us, and urging us to follow as quickly as we can. And if we're lucky, and if we can run fast enough, we might catch a glimpse of Jesus before he disappears down the road.

In the beginning of Mark's gospel, we discover that Jesus has already been baptized, spent time in the wilderness, endured John's arrest, and then headed off to Galilee where he began his public ministry. All of this takes place, and we're only 14 verses into the first chapter! Catch your breath if you can. This Jesus is moving on down the road at a very fast pace.

As Jesus comes to Galilee to begin his public ministry, he begins to preach: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) Or, as The Message translates it, "Times up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life now!"

This was no ordinary use of the word for time. When talking about the time of day or ordinary routines, one would use the word "*chronos*" – from that we get the word *chronology* today. It's the kind of ordinary time we're talking about when you look at your watch or the calendar.

When Jesus refers to time on this occasion, he uses the word "*kairos*" to denote time. It has a different meaning and purpose. Kairos indicates a quality and dimension to time – A moment that presents a unique opportunity that can change your life, and is not likely to be repeated.

When dealing with kairos time, you usually find yourself at a crossroads or at an important juncture in your life -- big moments such as graduation . . . the right job . . . getting married . . . giving birth . . . all of these have the quality of *kairos* time. That's what Jesus is talking about so often in the gospels, and it's now or never as far as Mark is concerned – the opportunity of a lifetime.

Tomorrow will be too late for these new disciples.

Jesus' sense of urgency about the kingdom of God being near was not just for people to repent and change their lives, but also a word for his disciples to drop everything and follow him. The kingdom of God had come near to them that very day.

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So what do you make of this story as Jesus travels along the Sea of Galilee, and spots Andrew and his brother Simon Peter fishing and casting their nets into the sea? This was their livelihood. They were fishermen by trade. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people," Jesus promised.

Amazingly, they left their nets and followed him. A little further down the road, Jesus notices James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, who were in their boat mending their nets. He called them, and *immediately* (there's that word again) they left their father Zebedee in the boat, and followed Jesus.

Maybe the would-be disciples had heard a thing or two about Jesus – about his teachings and many miracles, or how he waited for no one when calling the disciples – not even permitting a man to bury his deceased father, or not giving another man a moment to go back home and tell his family good bye before following Jesus, as we learn later on.

If you're not exhausted and overwhelmed after reading the first half of Mark's gospel, then you're missing the point. Who *is* this man who compels people to drop everything and follow him immediately?

Who is he to you today? What if you had been there on the shore? How would you have responded? Be honest. I think about how some other people have reacted to this story, and how it changed their lives. I knew a middle-aged executive who suddenly gave up his job, and heeded a call to go to seminary, and a woman who decided to give up her comfortable suburbia lifestyle to enlist in the Peace Corps. I know her. That person is my sister-in-law. And what about the Apostle Paul, once a fierce persecutor of Christians, whose conversion to Christianity was sudden and dramatic when he heard the voice of God and was struck down on the road to Damascus?

Are these people and others like them crazy or irrational, or going through some sort of midlife crisis? Or are they just more attuned to the spiritual seeds that Christ planted in their hearts and minds? I'll ask you: Have you ever done anything irrational? Followed your first impulse or intuition? Jumped into action before thinking it all through? That's not how we're raised. That's not

what we teach our children. People might admonish you – “Don’t do anything hasty, or something you might regret.”

When I first met my wife, I knew right away that she was the one I was going to marry. Sometimes it has taken me longer to decide what to have for dessert! It happened quickly, and rocked my boat. Before long, I was flying to California to meet her family. That was thirty years ago, so I guess things worked out.

What was happening in all these situations? I like what the French philosopher Blaise Pascal said: “The heart has it’s own reasons that reason alone cannot comprehend.”

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Why were the disciples willing to accept the risks and uncertainties that came with walking away from their jobs and families into an unknown future to follow Jesus? Was there something in his voice or a look in his eye? We don't know. They followed by faith.

Following Jesus can be transformative, but it is also risky. We don’t usually know the destination before we start. I don’t know what weighty decisions you might have to make, but when you do, I hope you will make them with faith – not blind faith, but faith nonetheless. Chances are you will make decisions without knowing all the facts, and without knowing the outcome.

We like to be in control --in control of our family, our work, our finances, our future. We don’t like it when anything or anybody knocks us off course. We can think of a thousand reasons not to change our situation or change our minds. But have you ever found your heart burning inside you – like the travelers on the road to Emmaus when they met the risen Jesus? Have you ever just gone with the feeling in your gut without knowing how things would turn out? You’re not alone.

Following Jesus is life-giving and life-changing—but it’s also demanding. We don’t receive a map or get to ask questions before we start walking. I like the way Frederick Buechner weighs in on the subject in his book, The Alphabet of Grace. He writes: “When you wake up in the morning, called by God to be a self again, if you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are.”

The disciples found out. But it can be downright disconcerting. Jesus stands on the shore of our lives, calling us to get out of our boats and follow him into

unchartered waters. The one thing that makes it possible for us to follow is that we know he will walk with us the entire way, leading the way right into the kingdom. There's no reason to wait. Let's start walking. Amen

Mark 1:14-20

1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,

1:15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

1:16 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.

1:17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

1:18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

1:19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

1:20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.