

Today's Gospel lesson from Mark begins with an ominous message, perhaps even a foreshadowing of Holy Week events, "Now after John was arrested." John had baptized scores of people from the Judean countryside, including Jesus himself. John's ministry of repentance had challenged the religious and political powers to reorient their lives toward God's power and purpose. John would pay the consequences of his challenging message.

And now, after 40 days Jesus emerges from that same wilderness, the time and place for Jesus to prepare and pray. It's where he was baptized in the Jordan River and tempted by Satan. Purified and tested, he emerges from the wilderness, bringing with him God's new world, God's future into the present reality. As Jesus' ministry begins, we can anticipate how it, too, will turn out, with arrest and crucifixion.

And so, in this context, with this dangerous consequence looming for Jesus, he begins his ministry, by saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news." The word, "fulfilled" suggests that something has been completed or finished. It's curious to me that Jesus uses it to begin his earthly ministry. It's been suggested that this is the balance between Epiphany and Advent, between proclaiming God's kingdom is near and fulfilled, on the one hand, and on the other, proclaiming we need to wait and pray for God's coming. [Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 1, p. 284] As Jesus begins, we're at the already, but not yet moment. God is not bound by the same time and space parameters we are. For God it's as if the past, present and future have all collapsed. I must say, as someone with a background in science, wrapping my head around faith issues that I can't plot on a line, are particularly challenging. But that's where we are, God's time has been fulfilled, God's kingdom is near, and so Jesus begins. What does Jesus say next? - the parallel imperatives to repent and to believe! God is graciously near, and now the call, the command, is for people to respond with repentance and belief.

Jesus' first stop is to Simon (who we'll come to know as Peter), and his brother, Andrew, and then to James and his brother, John. Jesus says, "Follow me." There's no verbal response to Jesus; they just drop everything and go. Jesus didn't have to perform any miracles or heal the sick or walk on water, or turn water into wine. They just went. Karl Barth, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century reformed theologian, has noted, "they are elected to discipleship simply through the fact that Jesus claims them." By the way, you can't get much more reformed than that! When Jesus declares that they are now ready and able to fish for people, that's only because Jesus had first fished for them, had first claimed them. [Ibid.] And, they responded, immediately. The other three Gospel writers use the word, "Immediately" just a handful of times; however, the writer of Mark used it 42 times. There's an urgency to Mark. I'm not certain why, other than to say that Mark was the first gospel written. He, as well as the Apostle Paul, who also wrote very early, both thought that Jesus would return in their lifetime. There was an urgency to their ministry. There's work that needs to be done before Jesus returns. We've got things to do, people to fish for. I don't think we have that same sense of urgency today. I'm not sure if the other Gospel writers, who wrote a generation or two after Mark, even had that same intense urgency.

John Calvin, the founder of the Reformed Tradition, reportedly used this passage from Mark as a paradigm for calling Christians. According to Calvin, God called "rough mechanics" like Simon, Andrew, James and John. I'm not sure what's meant by the phrase "rough mechanics." Did they even have mechanics in the 16<sup>th</sup> century? But, I think this simply means that God calls all kinds of people, not just those who society may deem successful or most powerful or most talented or wealthy. It wouldn't be Calvin if he didn't also remind us that, like these disciples, who misunderstood and failed Jesus at every turn, we too are sinners in need of forgiveness. Like them, despite our failings, we are being transformed into followers of Christ. "Like them, we are

called not to the enjoyment of a private salvation but to a public vocation.” [ibid, p. 288] There is work to be done for the kingdom of God which is near and being proclaimed.

I want to talk a bit about repentance. That’s Jesus’ command to these first four called disciples. The classic definition of “to repent” is to turn around, to change your mind or life direction. It’s more than just feeling regret or sorrow for something; it’s an active decision to stop doing it. Remember who the initiator is in our story. We don’t repent in order for the Kingdom of God to be near. The kingdom is already here. We don’t follow Jesus in hopes of finding him; we follow Jesus because he has already found us and called us. [Ibid. p. 287]

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the one we use, translates verse 17, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” This sounds as though Jesus is giving those first disciples another task to do, and maybe that’s part of it. No doubt that’s part of it, but Greek scholars suggest a bit of a nuanced translation to this verse, suggesting it be, “Follow me and I will make you to become fishers for people.” Do you hear the difference? The change will be in the hearts and minds of those Jesus calls to follow him. Fishing for people is not merely a task to add to one’s “to do” list. There’s a difference between “I will make you fish” and “I will make you to become fishers.” Their lives, our lives, will have a re-orientation toward Christ, a new identity in Christ, one to be shared with others. [Ibid. p. 289] I’ll even be so bold to say that when we live our lives re-oriented toward Christ, with a new identity in Christ, others will look at us, and think, “I want some of that.” “I, too, want to follow Christ.”

One final word and then I’ll stop. It’s no coincidence that one of the very first things Jesus did in his ministry was to find others to come along. Ministry is not meant to be done alone. It is meant to be done together. Freda Gardner was my Christian Education professor at seminary. In all of her classes, she assigned us to work together in small groups. Undoubtedly, we’d balk at that assignment, wishing, instead, to just do it by ourselves. It’s easier to do assignments alone. You don’t have to schedule meetings with one another; you don’t need to worry that someone may not do the task they agreed to do; maybe someone won’t do the task up to your standard; maybe their thoughts and beliefs are different than yours. Hmmm, that sounds like a church meeting. Freda would remind us that this is to prepare us for ministry, which is not meant to be done alone. We welcome others into the fold of God’s kingdom, a kingdom that is already here, and still yet to come. Jesus is calling us, counting on us. Besides, fishing is more fun with friends, even fishing for people. Amen.