

And they followed him

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Mark 1:14-20

This year the lectionary draws a large amount of the gospel material from the Mark. Mark is the earliest and shortest of the four gospels. One thing that is critical to remember about Mark is that it is written assuming the readers, or in reality the listeners had a great deal of background knowledge. Now I say listeners to the gospel because it is important to remember that 90-95% of the population at that time would have been illiterate and the only way they would hear the gospel is the way I did it today, by a dramatic telling. That is why I believe storytelling is so important. This is how the early church would have experienced scriptures, all of them.

Written shortly after the destruction of the temple in the rebellion of 65, Mark tells the most important stories in what is usually a very short form. Today's passage is an example. In contrast to the other gospels, especially Luke and Matthew who use Mark as their basis and then fill in details, Mark is all about fast action. I use the example that if the gospels are all different news stations, Mark is your local 6:00 news. Written for the people in the region, relying on their background knowledge and with only a short amount of time to tell the story.

The focus of Mark is on the Good News. In fact that is how Mark starts, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." You cannot get any more direct and to the point. Our passage this morning starts with "After John was arrested." Nothing else is said about this. The assumption is that the listener knew all about John's arrest and execution. So you see we really need to read Mark with some background information available.

So too is the calling of the disciples. He takes just six verses to tell about calling the first four disciples. Note also that the word immediately is used twice in those six verses. Mark uses this word a lot in his gospel.

Now that word is where some people stumble on this depiction of the calling of the disciples. I was very purposeful in going very quickly through those verses to emphasize the immediacy. However many people will tell me that they have trouble imagining all four of them, following a total stranger off on an adventure without any consideration, thought or concern.

Now I suspect Jesus was a very charismatic figure, but even that still makes it somewhat hard to believe. When I did a role playing of this passage a couple of years ago, I took on the role of old Zebedee sitting in his boat wondering what

just happened as his boys (and if you read Matthew his wife) left to follow this Jesus person.

Some geography is a good starting point. It is important to realize that the next verse says he went to Capernaum, which is where Simon Peter lived and went to Simon's house. Now the walk from the beach where Zebedee's boat would have been pulled up to Simon's house is about as far as from where I am standing out across the parking lot to Edinburgh road. I never realized that until this summer when I was in Capernaum. This isn't like they took off down the road for a long trip!

Now in my portrayal of Zebedee I have him speculate about what happened. Now Mark tells us about John's arrest right after Jesus comes out of the 40 days in the wilderness. I suspect that there was some gap of time between his days in the wilderness ending and John being arrested. Mark's listeners would have known that, which is why I say he relies on a certain amount of knowledge of the story. The other gospels fill this time in to some extent.

It would not surprise me if all four of the new disciples called had not heard the words of John the Baptist. Remember people from all around were flocking to the Jordan to be baptized. Again we know this from the other gospels. Maybe some of John's followers had wandered through Capernaum spreading his message. Maybe the four had even heard his prophesy about Jesus or had heard about Jesus. This is where the question of the time between the wilderness time and Jesus' arrival in Galilee makes for interesting speculation. What I am saying is that it is not impossible and I think probable that the people of that area might already have known Jesus. What this calling of the disciples marks is the beginning of his ministry in the gospel of Mark.

Now let us look at the two themes that Mark weaves together in this short and powerful passage; believe and follow.

The first part of the passage is worth a sermon all on its own. "Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God saying, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news." Here in one verse is the essence of the gospel message of Mark. Remember this is how Mark starts his gospel. The good news is a message of liberation, restoration and reconciliation. This is the good news that we have heard foretold in Isaiah back in Advent that soon Jesus will sit down in the synagogue in Nazareth and read and then say this has been fulfilled. The call to believe is in the Good News.

What Jesus does not say, anywhere in the Gospel of Mark is believe in me. No the invitation from Jesus the person is to follow him. Walk with him, join him in ministry, that is the invitation to Simon, Andrew, James, John and all of the disciples. Join him in sharing the Good News.

I want to go back to something I mentioned last week. Bishop Andy Doyle said that a call from God and in this case the call from Jesus is not a call to be a bishop or a priest or whatever but is an invitation to join him on the journey of discovering what God is calling you to do. The disciples simply follow and they have no idea what is about to happen. As Bishop Doyle said last week, if we knew all the ups and downs most of us might not follow and that might be true for our disciples, however they chose to trust and to follow.

So set aside all your issues about immediately they followed. I think most of us are more like old Jonah in our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures. Jonah not only is unsure about his call, but truly doesn't like the call that God has issued and literally heads in the other direction. God however stays with him and teaches him the lesson that nobody, not even the Gentiles of Nineveh are outside of the love and forgiveness of God. Even though these are Hebrew Scriptures it is still good news of God's love.

The Kingdom of God is near. Notice Jesus is not talking about the kingdom somewhere out there in the future for those who follow the rules on earth. The kingdom is now and is very near. The Good News is not about heavenly reward but how we follow the example of Jesus here, now, each and every day. And the kingdom he promises is truly good news.

Lastly let me leave you with one other thought. An evangelist is not a recruiter for the church. An Evangelical Christian is not really some sort of ultra-conservative Christian. The term has been corrupted in modern use. You see, I am an Evangelical because my call above all else is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ that teaches that we can have the kingdom here and now and that God loves us all of us period. So come follow Jesus and do it immediately.