

“Fishers” GPPC, 1-21-18  
Psalm 62:5-12, Mark 1:14-20

A few summers ago, one of our members and I drove down to Raleigh for a protest gathering outside the state house. It was sweltering day and the grassy area outside was packed with happy protestors milling around, carrying signs. Eventually, various speakers and singers came to the microphone. The crowd cheered. The mood was hopeful and excited. At some point, I don't remember exactly how it happened, I found myself in a procession with people cheering on both sides as we walked along. After a while, I realized it was the procession for folks who were planning to go inside and get arrested. Wait...What? I had not planned on getting arrested. I hadn't arranged for bail, a ride home, pastoral coverage if I ended up having to stay the night or come back for trial. And, of course, I had not mentioned to the session or my wife that, oh, by the way, I might get arrested. So before the procession got inside, and feeling slightly cowardly, guilty, and embarrassed I slipped into the crowd.

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Is there anything or anyone you and I would be willing to be arrested for?

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God...”

Mark mentions John’s arrest practically in passing. Maybe Mark wants us to see that following Jesus is worth getting arrested for, and, in John’s case, even being beheaded for. Bet John didn’t check with the session before he got arrested.

John’s arrest not only reminds us that Jesus is worth being arrested for but that following Jesus is costly. Mark tells us this at the very beginning of his gospel, and he will tell us again and again.

John is in prison where he will remain until he is murdered by King Herod as a party favor for his stepdaughter. But before being imprisoned and murdered John completes his holy mission. He proclaims the coming of Jesus and he calls the people to prepare. And now the laser focus is on Jesus. Here are his first public words in Mark’s gospel. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

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And these brief words carry the weight of eternity. They mean the long-awaited time has finally come, and God's kingdom is breaking into history like the sun's first light peeking over the horizon at dawn. The sun is not yet blazing overhead, but light is piercing the darkness. Good news.

And the metaphor of God's *kingdom* coming is no accident. God's reign, God's kingdom clashes with the Roman Empire and with every empire in history. The Roman Empire run by brutal power, insatiable ego, and ever-present threat stands on one side. But God's kingdom of kindness, generosity, forgiveness, and love stands on the other. And a decision must be made, then and now.

"Repent, and believe the good news," says Jesus. Repent means not merely giving up a couple bad habits. Instead, repentance means investing ourselves in this Jesus and the strange notion that God has come and been supremely revealed in him. It is a fundamental reorientation of life. And as we immerse ourselves in Jesus' teaching, living, healing, and dying, we find life as we had never known it before.

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It's not a matter of just waiting to die and go to heaven. It's that life right now is transformed too.

Have you found that to be true? I don't mean that every day you feel deliriously happy and you walk around with a fake smile. And I don't mean pretending you're happy when you're actually sad. What I mean is discovering our purpose in life is to be instruments of God's love in the world. There is tremendous satisfaction in seeing our lives as a part of God's kingdom at work in the world, knowing that we are part of the great, grand reign of God that even now is coming into being. There is great fulfillment in that.

But I don't mean that we never have doubts or that we never worry or get nervous about dying. What I mean is that even in our doubts, worries, or fears there is this bedrock of faith that through Christ God is for us and not against us, and that God's love will not be defeated. So we will be okay. We will be safe in God's embrace, cherished and joyful, and ultimately the entire universe will be made right. Good news. Great news.

And this all leads to the second part of the story. Mark says Jesus passes by the Sea of Galilee and he runs into Simon and Andrew who are, believe it or not, fishing. And Jesus says, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And *immediately* (immediately being one of Mark’s favorite words) immediately they leave their nets and follow him. Jesus goes a little farther, sees James and his brother John, fixing their nets. *Immediately*, he calls them and they leave their father and a couple of hired hands in the boat and follow him.

What did any of these guys say when Jesus called them? We don’t know. Mark doesn’t tell us. Why do they leave right away? Does Jesus say something amazing that causes them to follow? Is there something about Jesus that commands their devotion? Why does Jesus choose them instead of some other folks? What does the father of James and John think about his sons leaving him out in the boat with some hired hands? It seems kind of rude, doesn’t it? We don’t know the answer to any of these questions, because Mark doesn’t tell us.

And Mark doesn’t tell us, probably because these questions aren’t important to him. What’s important to him is Jesus, the call of Jesus, and

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the response to Jesus. The call of Jesus is to follow, follow in the sense of being his disciples, and to do so “immediately,” because the kingdom of God has come near, life is short, and “time’s a wastin.” This is urgent. And the call is also to become fishers of people. Become disciples who invite others to become disciples.

And, of course, each of us receives the same call—to become disciples of Christ *and* to become fishers of people inviting others to become disciples of Christ too. And by now, some of us are wondering where the exits are to the church, right? “Okay, Jesus. I’ll try to follow you, but inviting other people to follow too, especially in this post-Christian, church is uncool, secular United States, well, you’ll need to perform a miracle.”

But here’s the thing. I believe we are in a place for God to do some miracles. I believe people are hungry for a life of following this odd and wonderful Jesus, the One we call Lord who is the path and purpose to our lives, the One we call Savior who saves us *from* our selfish brokenness and saves us *for* a life of service.

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Here's how the conversation sometimes goes these days.

Somebody will say to me (maybe to you too) something like this. "I can't believe in God, because it's all superstition. And I can't believe in God when there is so much suffering and injustice." And we might answer, "Tell me more about this God you don't believe in. I probably don't believe in that God either. I don't accept everything in the Bible literally. Some of it is symbolic and some of it is literal. And suffering and injustice are an affront to the God I believe in and they are a call to action for God's church."

Or someone might say, "Well, I used to go to church, but it disappointed me. The people were sometimes unpleasant. The pastor occasionally rubbed me the wrong way. So I gave it up, and now I'm spiritual but not religious." And maybe we say, "I hear you. Sometimes the people in our church and our pastor can be irritating. Of course, that's true of almost any family or group. But I believe people are looking for the very adventure of faith that Jesus offers. And our congregation is a great place for some people to share that adventure, because as Jesus showed again and again (as he shows in the gospel

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reading this morning), being his follower is not something we do alone; it's something we do in community. And our congregation is a loving and imperfect community, filled with loving and imperfect people. For the most part here we find: open-minded faith that is in conversation, not in battle, with science. Assurance and a faith community to provide comfort during times of sorrow. A robust intellectual environment that has some answers but is humble enough to admit it doesn't have all the answers. I believe people are looking for a community like this. They just might not know it yet." Maybe we'd say something like that. Maybe you've had similar conversations.

What people are not thirsty for is another slick come-on or manipulation to try to bring people to faith or to drag them into church. Instead, what they crave are people who are real, who admit their flaws, and who can listen, but also engage in honest dialogue about their faith. Maybe you and I could be those people.

So what do you say? Wanna go fishing? "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Amen. ©Jeff Paschal