

Sermons for the Journey

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Epiphany 3 – Year B

Sunday, January 21, 2018

Mark's Gospel was written somewhere around 70 CE for the persecuted church in Rome. Many scholars believe that Mark was Peter's interpreter in Rome. He recorded many of the stories and made them into a simple, succinct story. The irony of Mark's Gospel is that the disciples never seem to understand what is going on. Mark wants you to recognize in the Gospel what the disciples just can't seem to grasp that Jesus brings us the eternal truth of Jesus Christ. Mark wants you to seriously consider being a follower and a believer in Christ.

John the Baptist was baptizing folks in the Jordon River by the desert. He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John proclaimed, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:4-8). It was said that John never gave a sign or miracle, but that what he said was the absolute truth. As Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan, heaven was torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. Jesus then said, "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark:1:15)

Imagine what it was like as Jesus public ministry first began. Andrew and Simon Peter were fishing on the shores of the fresh water Sea of Galilee, a lake seven miles wide and thirteen miles long. The green hills form a picturesque background to the fresh water lake. The brothers stand in shallow water, throwing their round casting nets, adorned on the edges with small grey weights. They pull the net in and drag their haul of small four to six inch fish into their boat. In the meantime, Jesus has worked his way north along the Jordon River from Judea. The plush green area by the river stands in sharp contrast to the arid harsh environment of the desert nearby. Jesus sees Andrew and Simon Peter fishing by the shore. He cups his hands around his mouth and calls to them, "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." Now the brothers are sweating in the hot sun. They are tired and hungry from a long days work. Their boat is filled with buckets of fish. This is a day like so many before and yet it is so different. The Gospel tells us, "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." They walk to shore and continue with Jesus to the harbor, where all the fishermen keep their boats. James and his brother John are sitting in their boat with their father, mending and drying their nets after a hard day's work.

Oh do I remember those four summers that I dug clams on the Great South. I had a sixteen foot long aluminum rake with a basket on the end of it with 2 ¾ inch teeth. Each day I would head out at sunrise and clam until I had two counts or 1000 little neck clams. You threw the rake from the boat and dug the teeth into the sand and then pilled with all your strength until you started to hear the crunch of clams rattling in the basket. I would drive my boat to the Maple Avenue dock and sell my clams to buddy. He would hand me fifty bucks and even though I was fifteen Buddy would always give me an ice cold Heineken. I would take my boat back to the dock and sometimes would just lie in the grass, exhausted from a hard days work. My hands were raw from the friction of the rake handle, my back was sore, my nose was sunburned, but I was as happy as a clam. It is hard to describe working on the water every day, but you get connected to it. Fishing is hard work in the hot sun and I can imagine the Zebedee boys sitting in their boat, scorched from the sun, and tired from a long day's work.

When Jesus calls them, "Immediately they leave the boat and their father, and follow him." What is it about Jesus simple call that immediately summons them to turn and follow a new way of living? The connection they feel to the Lord is deeper than they can understand. God's call tugs at our heart and when we follow that call we are connected to our life's work and we feel the peace that passes all understanding.

I have been speaking to you the past couple weeks of the action and power of the Holy Spirit. Is there another explanation of why these four men would leave everything in their life with the words, "Come, follow me?"

We can't possibly know exactly why they followed Jesus, but I suggest that there is something about Jesus ministry that draws our hearts to the hope and love of God in a way that is easier felt than understood. We all yearn for this feeling of being connected to God and in line with the purpose that we were created to fulfill. I believe that each and every one of us stands on that shore at certain times in our life and decides whether to turn and follow Jesus' call to a new way of life. Each of us must take that leap of faith to follow our heart to a deeper connection to our Lord. When we answer that call the lonely are visited, the deaf can hear, the blind can see, the hungry are fed, and the sick are healed.

The prophets told of a messiah who would come and bring hope to the poor and the oppressed. Jesus' life shows us how that is fulfilled. In the weeks to come, Jesus will go out to the needy and the oppressed and bring them from brokenness to wholeness. By giving of ourselves to Christ we become connected. We start to focus on the needs of others and we become part of God's master plan to be the hope of the poor and the oppressed. If the people in the temple are amazed at his teaching and even unclean spirits listen to him, why is it that many Christians do not respect the authority of Jesus Christ?

“Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return” (Annie Dillard).

Our ministry starts with faith, which leads to worship, which immediately sends out be the light of Christ to an increasingly dark world. Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). We need to see the Kingdom of God as taking us to somewhere we have not been before. Jesus is manifest in the love of God and one another. Jesus came that we might have life and live it abundantly.

When the Gospel no longer amazes us and when we don’t immediately feel the truth of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, I fear that we become a people that hear, but do not listen or act. Attendance will dwindle, budgets will struggle, and many churches will close unless we follow God’s path in the future. We too have all authority in heaven and on earth through the power of the Holy Spirit at our disposal through our faith. The question is, “Will you follow the boundary breaking, healing, hunger satisfying, thirst quenching, life transforming path that Jesus has given to us?” **Amen.**