

The Fierce Urgency of Now

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Texts: Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

Last week, we had John's version of calling some of the disciples. Today, we have Mark's version. It's important as we read the various Gospels to remember that they were telling different stories. I don't mean that they were relating different episodes – although sometimes they were. I mean that they had different purposes in telling their stories.

Mark is telling the story about the Son of Man, or Human One, who is announcing the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God – today I used the word Empire of God. Mark is telling the story of an alternate order. The word he uses that we normally translate “kingdom” is *basileia* – the same word that would be used to describe the Roman Empire. So he is explicitly contrasting the rule of God with the rule of Rome. And he is emphasizing the humanity of Jesus.

Each time we come around to Year B, I recommend that you try and make time to sit down and read the whole Gospel of Mark in one sitting. This year, instead, I'm recommending that you make time to come to hear my friend Phil Ruge-Jones tell the whole Gospel of Mark next Sunday.* Phil is a Biblical Storyteller – he has been learning Bible stories by heart for 15 years or more. I've been trying to learn them for a while, and I will commit more effort to that this year. But Phil does it really well – and the Gospel of Mark is the perfect Gospel to experience in this way. First of all, it's the shortest Gospel, so you really can hear it in one sitting.

Secondly, Phil uses a different translation, and sometimes his own translation, to try and get at the meaning of the original Greek, and so you really get a clear sense of Mark's Gospel hearing it told this way.

And one of the things about Mark's Gospel is that there is a real sense of immediacy about it – there is an intensity and urgency to this Gospel that is quite compelling, and that comes through more clearly in the telling of it than in the reading of it.

One of the distinctives of Mark's story is his repeated use of the Greek word *euthus* which means “immediately”. Matthew's Gospel is 28 chapters long and he uses this word 8 times. Luke's is 34 chapters, John's is 21 chapters and they each use this word 3 times. Mark's Gospel is 16 chapters long, half as long as Luke's and he uses this word 41 times. However, it's easy to miss that in our usual pattern of reading the Bible a short section at a time from a modern

* Note, for those who cannot attend Phil's “Telling” of the Gospel, you can find him online telling the Gospel, one chapter at a time. You can at least see various chapters - chapter one is found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OS_hpt_xeU&t=167s

translation. For example, in the first chapter of Mark, this word occurs 10 times. But we normally read this chapter over 4 different weeks. And some of the translations use different words as it reappears in the reading, because in English we generally avoid repetition. But taking those two together, it is easy to see why we miss this. In our reading today there were 2 instances of this word. So in one version – they said, “right away” for one time and “at that very moment” for the other one. And then it’s easy to miss that repetition. Phil uses some sound effects to emphasize this word, and another scholar, Richard Swenson, uses the word “Bam!” instead of “immediately” so that you have it told this way:

Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will teach you to fish for people,” and Bam!
They followed him. After going a little farther he saw James and John, Zebedee’s sons, in their boat repairing the fishing nets. Bam! He called them. And they followed him.

This definitely helps us to notice the heightened tension in Mark’s Gospel – and to sense the immediacy of the Gospel call.

These are some of the issues that translators have to deal with. In any event, Mark’s Gospel is told with a distinct sense of urgency. And he is telling it this way because for Mark it *is* urgent. He is writing either just before or just after the Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire in AD 66 – a rebellion that was viciously crushed by Rome. In the year 67, a real problem in Jerusalem was a shortage of wood because of all the crucifixions. People are overwhelmed and in crisis—how to make sense of what has happened? So whereas for us the crucifixion of Jesus is a distant event, for the first hearers of the story, it was an experience that people they know would have suffered. Mark is reminding people that God is present in our human experience... that we are called to follow Jesus and that following the way of Jesus can be costly. For Mark, this choice matters and is ultimately a choice between resisting the powers of Empire and aligning ourselves with God’s Empire, or being complicit: going along to get along.

And his story opened by describing John, and then establishing Jesus as John’s replacement – and some think that introducing the calling of the disciples at this point is directing us to understand the disciples...and us... as those who will follow Jesus in embodying the mission of God.

Mark is letting us know that our response matters. And he lets us know in this story this morning that the call will change our lives – these four fishermen leave not only their jobs, but their families. Following Jesus is not just a sideline—it has redefined their lives. The world is in crisis—and Mark is saying that following Jesus is the way forward, a way that will change the lives of those who follow, and will change the world when we follow.

Let me point out one further thing about the way Phil tells Mark’s version of the story. Phil uses the phrase “courageous trust” as a synonym for “faith” because in Mark’s Gospel, faith is the opposite of fear. And, this too is true for us. It takes courage to believe in God’s possibilities, to make ourselves vulnerable to hope. It takes trust to build our lives on those

possibilities that we cannot see. It takes courageous trust to take a stand for God's dreams, for God's justice, God's care for the poor and the excluded when most of the institutions in our world are telling us that power is what matters. It takes courageous trust to keep working to protect and preserve the earth when our government has turned its back on science. It takes courageous trust to work for reconciliation in a world that embraces polarization and enmity. It takes courageous trust to speak out for immigrants when our fellow church members, our friends, and our neighbors may disagree with us. As the disciples experienced, so too our choices might mean losing some of the relationships we hold dear.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the stakes for human history in the resistance to Nazism in Germany in his time, even as most churches went along with Hitler's regime, and he gave his life for that struggle. A recent issue of *Sojourners Magazine* asked the question, "Is this a Bonhoeffer moment?" Bonhoeffer said at one point, "As much as the Christian would like to remain distant from political struggle, even here the commandment of love urges the Christian to stand up for [their] neighbor." Perhaps now is a good time to read, or re-read, Bonhoeffer's classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

As in the time of Mark, as in the time of Bonhoeffer, as in the time of Martin Luther King, Jr., it is indeed a time for courageous trust. The title for today's sermon came from a speech of Dr. Martin Luther King that he gave one year before he was killed – the speech was titled "Beyond Vietnam" and in it, Dr. King made connections between the exploitation of poor people in this country and war against poor people in Vietnam. It was a speech that angered a lot of people, and it was a speech that took courageous trust to give. It was a speech that, aside from the references to Vietnam, could be given today. In it, King said, "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time... We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation.

"We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace... and justice throughout the developing world -- a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

"Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter -- but beautiful -- struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the [children] of God, and our brothers [and sisters] wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full [people], and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history."

We might wish that our faith could just be about our personal lives and finding inner peace and meaning, but Jesus – and the prophets before him – always were clear that God calls us for the world’s sake as well as our own. Others might prefer their faith to be confined to prophetic speech and action geared to changing the world, but Jesus also calls us to submit our own lives to his transforming love. We are called to both public and private discipleship. On a variety of public issues (care of the earth, health care, immigration, support for the poor) the Bible has a clear and consistent message. And for a variety of personal issues (hunger for meaning, loneliness, worry, and broken relationships) the teachings of Jesus hold life-changing answers. It may take courage to proclaim the Biblical perspective, it takes trust to try new ways of responding to our own personal challenges, but following Jesus has always called women and men to lives of courageous trust. Just as Jesus came along the shoreline to call Andrew and Simon, James and John, he still calls us today. God still wants to bring a new world into being – a world where public relationships would be governed by justice and personal relationships would be shaped by love. It’s always easy to respond tomorrow; Mark asks whether we are ready to respond to Jesus today.

Amen.