

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Sunday, January 24, 2021

Responding to God's Call

Readings: Jonah 3:1-5,10; Psalm 62:6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

“In God is my safety and my honor; God is my strong rock and refuge.” Psalm 62:8

Today we continue our journey in exploring the Gospel of Mark. Mark's gospel is distinctive for several reasons. It's believed to be the first Gospel to be written, it's tightly written and the shortest of the four gospels. It's fast paced as the story of Jesus' ministry is told with events moving quickly from one event to the next. Mark's Gospel is also complex and nuanced. It's rich in meaning, if one is willing to deeply explore the text.ⁱ “It tells the story of God working through Jesus ... to reconcile the world to himself, and to draw humanity closer to God. It is meant to form us spiritually, to remind us that we were created in God's image, placed on this planet for a purpose, and called to use our time, talents, and treasure to serve God faithfully.”ⁱⁱ

This morning's Gospel text focuses our attention on a call to discipleship. We're all called to ministry, whether we're ordained or lay persons. We're all called to be disciples following Jesus. After Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan by his cousin John, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness where angels waited on him when he was tempted by Satan. Mark tells us that after John had been arrested, Jesus went to the Sea of Galilee to proclaim the good news of God and announce the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus picked up John's mantle and continued John's vital ministry, his call to repentance, and his proclamation.

It's significant that Jesus began his ministry in Galilee. Located in northern Palestine, Galilee was far away from the centers of power and wealth in Judea and Rome. Its residents were predominantly poor and many were Gentiles. Everything that Jesus did was intentional and had a purpose. In today's society, it would be similar to Jesus beginning his ministry in Appalachia or in rural farming communities in the mid-Western states, rather than in Washington, D.C. or New York City.

As Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he approached a family fishing operation. Simon and brother Andrew were casting nets for fish and James and brother John were arranging nets. Jesus invited them to follow him. What is perhaps remarkable is that all four of them immediately abandoned their work to follow Jesus.

It's natural to wonder how they could just walk away from everything that was important to them—their families, work, and homes to follow Jesus. They were leaving behind everything that provided security and predictability in their lives. Considering that John the Baptist had been arrested, it was undoubtedly a risky time to follow Jesus. They must have believed that the kingdom of God that John and Jesus had spoken of offered them something so important and worthwhile pursuing, that they were willing to risk it all to follow Jesus. They were ordinary working folks just like you and me, who were living far away from the center of power and wealth. Like us, they probably knew that many people in their community were poor, hungry, homeless, suffering with illnesses and without much hope. Like so many people today, they probably yearned for a better world and society.

Jesus recognized the need for change and renewal. He had a vision for changes in society that would transform people's lives and give them hope. Jesus was passionate about sharing the vision of God's kingdom and he was deeply committed in his mission to help people who were suffering and give them hope. In inviting the four fishermen to follow him and fish for people, Jesus was in effect saying, “I will transform your lives. What you do, who you are, where you go, what you hope for—all will change if you catch this vision I offer you.”ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that they

immediately left their nets, livelihood, families and homes and followed Jesus suggests that they were swept into the intensity of Jesus' vision and mission.^{iv}

Whether we're a lifelong Christian or relatively new in your faith journey, this passage is meaningful for all of us. God is working through Jesus in our lives. God is always present with us at whatever stage we're at in our faith journey. God is calling each of us "to move to something greater, to journey with him farther and deeper, to be always open to possibility and always prepared to respond."^v

Jesus as a devout Jew would have learned about the kingdom of God through the scriptures read and the psalms prayed in the synagogue. We learn about the kingdom of God through the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and through Jesus' preaching and teaching, especially in the parables that he used to describe the kingdom of God. Justice is central in God's kingdom. Justice is the word that is used repeatedly to describe God's will and longing for human society.^{vi} In fact, the word justice appears 173 times in the New Revised Standard Bible.^{vii}

We're all aware of the many aspects of injustice in our society today. There are huge gaps between the rich and poor; millions of unemployed people; millions of men, women and children who are hungry; and far too many people have no health insurance to protect them when they fall ill. Many people are yearning for things to change and to get better; they're longing for hope. As Episcopalians, in our baptismal vows we commit "to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."^{viii} If you're unemployed, hungry, homeless, or ill you often have no inner peace or hope. And all too often, you're not treated with respect and dignity.

What part of the vision of God's kingdom speaks to your heart or motivates you to help people who are suffering? What can we do to strive for justice and peace among all people in Madison County and beyond? How can we help people who are being treated unjustly or marginalized in society? How can we continue to help women, men and children, who are hungry and homeless? How can we build God's kingdom right here and right now?

Like the disciples who were willing to leave everything that was familiar and secure for them, we have to believe that there is a better way. We have to believe that through the vision of God's kingdom, the lives of people can become better and there can be hope for everyone. We have to trust that God is present right there and now and that God is working in our lives to make things better. Like the experience of the disciples who followed Jesus, God may be calling us to journey down new paths that are unfamiliar to us, perhaps even scary for us.

We can have the same courage as the disciples to accept God's call, if we believe passionately in God's vision for us and for the world. We can be comforted and emboldened by the Psalmist, who reminds us that our hope is in God alone. God alone is our rock and our refuge. We are called to put our trust in God alone.^{ix} Let us pray. Loving and Almighty God, our hope and our redeemer, strengthen us to have the courage to follow Jesus in all that we say and do and embolden us to take risks in your name to build your kingdom on earth. Amen.

© 2021, Rev. Carol Ruthven

ⁱ Marek P. Zabriskie, ed. A Journey with Mark: The 50 Day Bible Challenge (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 2015), p. xi.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. xi.

ⁱⁱⁱ Herbert O'Driscoll, The Word Among Us: Year B, Volume 1 (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1999, p. 78.

^{iv} Ibid. p. 78.

^v Ibid. p. 78.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 79.

^{vii} <https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?quicksearch=justice&version=NRSV>

^{viii} The Book of Common Prayer, p. 305.

^{ix} Psalm 62:6-9.