

Year B Third Sunday After the Epiphany Mark 1 14 to 20

For many of us, the first thought that crosses our minds as we read this passage or hear this passage, is to wonder at the willingness of Simon and Andrew, James and John to leave their nets behind when Jesus says to them, “Follow me.” I think it is natural to ask ourselves, “would we do that same thing? If we had been in the story, would we have left everything to follow Jesus?”

Before we jump to those sorts of thoughts and get sidetracked by them right off the bat, let’s to rewind the story a bit and begin at the beginning of this passage. We are hearing the story of how Jesus first entered into his ministry in Galilee. It was after John was arrested and Jesus began proclaiming the good news of God. “The time is fulfilled,” Jesus announced. “The kingdom of God has come near; repent,” he shouts out to passers-by. “Believe!” he earnestly directs all who will listen. “Believe in the good news.”

Now Mark, as a writer, does not waste his time on words that don’t need to be in his story so, if he is telling us all of this happened after John was arrested, then that is an important piece of information. So let’s rewind the story a little bit more then, to remind ourselves of what John was doing. John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, Marks tells us, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was attracting huge crowds of Jewish people who knew the significance of what John was doing – baptizing people in the Jordan River was not a willy-nilly choice of location. John was symbolically inviting the Jewish nation to re-enter the Promised Land...to remember what that meant. They were God’s people. God had brought them out of the land of Egypt where all the rules of this world prevailed – power was based on position, property, and

pocketbook and people never had enough of those things. Life was about constantly getting more, getting ahead. God promised a better life to his chosen people – a life in which power was based on love, equality, and sharing so that all people were cared for, all people had enough. If only they would love God, and love others like God loved then this life would be theirs. They would be God's treasured possession.

And John was doing something even more important than reminding people of God's promise to them, more important than re-inviting them to turn from the world's ways back to God's way of life. John was telling them that the Messiah, the one who was going to ensure that Israel returned to this perfect life in God, the Messiah was about to appear, to make it happen. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me," he assures the people. Sure enough, right on cue, as John is removed from the action by getting arrested, Jesus arrives on the scene and takes over.

"The kingdom of God is near," Jesus cries out. "Repent!" Make sure you turn from the world's ways, turn back to God's ways so that you will be a part of this. "Believe!" he shouts. The perfect life in God that John reminded you of is here. Believe.

Believe, Jesus tells us. The kingdom of God is near, Jesus assures us. But, as a people, we have a hard time living as though this was really true. The world has a strong grip on us. We need to work, we need to make money...and this is precisely the reality that Mark shows us next. Mark knew what he was doing. The good news has been proclaimed. Now let's see how ordinary people living in the world like us deal with this good news.

Enter Simon, Andrew, James, and John...fishermen working hard, every day, to make a living, to support their families, to buy things they need and want. We may not be people who fish every day to make a living but, I am sure, that all of us are familiar – even if you may now be retired – we are all familiar with the daily grind of needing to work. Living in this society requires money. Money to put a roof over our heads and food on the table. Money to buy shoes and clothes and maybe even pay for children and grandchildren to go to college or university. No matter what we need or want, we must have money and money requires that at least someone in the household works and saves for retirement.

Yet when Jesus said to these men, “Follow me,” they gave up their source of money, they dropped their nets and they followed Jesus. That brings us back to where we started. Why were they willing to turn from their livelihood and become disciples of Jesus? We must remember they were Jewish men – they knew all about the perfect life in God described in their Scriptures. They knew all about the promised Messiah who was going to appear and make this happen. They certainly knew about the mouthy prophet named John who been reminding the Jewish people of all this. They’d even heard Jesus speak a few times about the kingdom of God being near. Jesus was an appealing speaker with an appealing message. So, when this young, passionate teacher turned to them, spoke directly to them, inviting them into God’s kingdom, inviting them to get others to join them in God’s kingdom – they were in...they were all for it...they were willing to turn from their lives in the world and follow Jesus.

Jesus needed people like those first disciples to join him in his work, to live the kingdom life and tell others about it. Is this what Mark is saying we have to do?

Give up our work, our homes, everything? We know for a fact that apostles like Paul did work – Paul told us he did. Paul was a tent-maker who lived off the earnings from his trade. So, if we don't need to drop everything like these first disciples what is this passage telling us?

The writings of the prophets are full of warnings to people living lives of corruption and oppression and luxury...people swindling others in the marketplace, judges taking bribes, and my favourite – the wealthy women of Samaria being called, “Cows of Bashan” ignoring the poor and yelling to their husbands to bring them a drink. In Revelation, John points out that the Romans were enjoying their luxuries of olives and wine while the people they had conquered were having trouble getting enough to eat.

We don't think twice about picking up a jar of olives from Italy, avocados from Mexico, rum from Jamaica, or cinnamon from Bangladesh. We often don't realize the lives we live, enmeshed in the world's idea of the good life because everyone else is living the same way, or better, or struggling to live that way. I am not saying you need to stop buying olives or enjoying cinnamon in your apple pie. The important thing to know about the people the prophets were warning was that, at the same time they had wholeheartedly turned toward all that the good life of the world had to offer, they had turned away from God – worshiping with their lips but not with their hearts.

The passage we heard today is about dropping things, letting go of things at the same time as following Jesus to live the kingdom life. We don't need to leave behind our possessions and go on the road evangelizing. And we don't need to stop buying olives and cinnamon. We do need to let go. We need to let go of the

world's way of thinking and operating – things that stop us from truly living the kingdom life. We live in the world and must engage in the world's systems of politics, economics, and social interactions. But, we do these things as Christians – always holding the kingdom values above the world's values, displacing the pre-eminence of pocketbook, property, and position with equality, sharing, and love.

It may surprise you that in the first couple of centuries after the apostles died, there were no missionaries yet the early church grew by the thousands. Christians lived lives that were attractive to others. Tertullian, living in the late 100's, early 200's, is famous for having written that non-Christians look at how Christians live and exclaim, "Look, how they love one another!"

Jesus wasn't asking Simon, Andrew, James, and John to completely leave behind who they were. They were still going to be fishermen but they were going to fish for people. They were going to drop from their lives what was stopping them from living the kingdom life and they were going to live that kingdom life with Jesus, calling others to do the same. Like those fishermen so long ago, now is the time to look at what we are clinging to, the things stopping us from truly living the kingdom life with Jesus. Imagine how things would change in our family circle, in our social circle, in our communities, if we were living lives that attracted and caused people to exclaim, "Look, how they love one another!"