

Leaving Our Nets

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SCRIPTURE – Mark 1: 1-11 – This is the good news about Jesus Christ, the son of God. It began as the prophet Isaiah had written: God said, “I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People from the whole Judean countryside and from Jerusalem went to John and were baptized by him in the river Jordan. John proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens open and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.” And then the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.

Mark 1: 16-20 - After 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying “The kingdom of God is near; repent and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people. Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As Jesus went a little further, he saw James and his brother John who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately Jesus called them, and James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Jesus.

Sermon - Some four decades after the historical life of Jesus, someone who was part of a Jesus community of Jews and Gentiles put together the first written narrative – with a beginning, a middle and an end – a written narrative which told how this community understood Jesus’ life and ministry. Prior to that, the accounts of Jesus were told orally as individual short stories. It probably goes without saying, but bears repeating, that no one was walking around with a pen and lined pad of paper writing down Jesus’ words as he spoke. Most people were illiterate and portable pens and pads had not yet been invented.

It is important to remember that the Bible is not a history book, nor is the Gospel of Mark a historical account; it is Mark’s narrative about Jesus. If you were here last Sunday for Andy and Vince’s amazing presentation of the Gospel of Mark, you already know a number of things about this account of Jesus’ life and ministry, including that Mark is a gospel of action and immediacy.

Biblical scholars date the Gospel of Mark around 70CE, some 40 years after Jesus’ death; it is the earliest of the four gospels. The Gospel of Matthew was written in the mid to late 80s, and Luke toward the beginning of the second century. Mark is the table of contents that Matthew and Luke use to write their gospels: about 90% of

Mark's stories are included in Matthew; about 66% of Mark's stories are included in Luke. Keep this sequence in mind – Mark, then Matthew, then Luke, because we will come back to it on Easter Sunday.

The dating of Mark shortly after 70CE is very important information. The harsh Roman occupation of Palestine led to a Jewish revolt in 66CE, an uprising that rejected not just Roman political authority but also the notion that the Roman emperor was divine. For four years, Roman soldiers steadily re-conquered everything in their path from Galilee toward Jerusalem, putting down the Jewish uprising. Documented by historians writing at the time, including Josephus, the Roman army then laid siege to Jerusalem during Passover in the spring of 70, a siege that lasted until September. When it was over, the Temple was completely destroyed, no Jewish life was spared – hundreds of thousands of children, women, and men were indiscriminately slaughtered – and Josephus reports that the city and the surrounding country looked like a desert. Even all the trees had been cut down and all signs of beauty laid to waste. The Roman Coliseum was funded by the plunder of Jerusalem and the Temple. It was a catastrophe in the history of ancient Judaism, not only because of the death and devastation but also because of the religious significance of the Temple, where God was believed to be present as a protector of Jerusalem and its people. This is the "wartime" reality that shapes Mark's gospel. Mark writes from within an early Jesus community within Judaism within the Roman Empire in the aftermath of this destruction. It is this background that gives birth to Mark's sense of immediacy: that something needs to happen, to change, soon and that the time to follow Jesus is now.

The Gospel begins with an announcement: This is the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God. I want to take a moment to deal with that phrase "the son of God" because I know it is loaded. For some people it is familiar, comforting and congruent. For others, it's like hitting a raw nerve, flashing us back to settings and beliefs we've given up. So let me put the phrase in historical context. The words "son of god" were central to Roman imperial theology. It was one of the most important titles given to the Emperors of Rome. For Mark to open his gospel with the announcement that Jesus is the son of God is a radical, attention-getting statement. The Emperor is not the son of God; Jesus is. Rome does not have the power; God does and imparts this power to humanity through Jesus. This is an "in your face" statement to Rome whose soldiers and administrators still occupy Mark's country.

After this announcement, the story begins not with Jesus' birth, but with his baptism by John the Baptist and a dramatic experience of a sacred vision that only Jesus sees of the heavens opening and the dove descending and a sacred voice that only Jesus hears calling him God's beloved. Then Jesus is sent to the wilderness to be tested and returns to begin his ministry announcing that the kingdom of God has come near and calling us to repent and believe in the good news.

The first century Jewish understanding of the kingdom of God was not about the afterlife, but about this life on earth. It is a political metaphor, as most of the world was organized into political kingdoms. Anyone listening to Jesus would know he is contrasting God's kingdom with Rome's kingdom, and what life on earth would be like if

God were king instead of Caesar. The kingdom of God is about transformation of individual lives and of the world itself.

Likewise the meaning of the words repent and believe would have been quite different for Mark's audience. To them, the word repent would mean to turn around, to return from exile, from separation from God, a separation that could be physical exile or spiritual or emotional exile. The word believe would not have meant accepting a set of statements or doctrines, but rather to commit oneself to a relationship with God marked by one's actions. So Jesus says, God's world is coming soon, so turn around from your exile, and be transformed in your life and in your actions. This, Mark says, is the Gospel, the good news of God, that Jesus preaches: the nearness of the kingdom of God and the call to return to God by our transformed lives and actions.

Jesus then sees Simon and Andrew casting a net into the sea, going about their daily livelihood as fishermen. Jesus goes up to them and says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Eugene Peterson translates this verse as, "Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." Another apt paraphrase of Jesus' words would be "Follow me and I will show you how to catch the BIG Fish!" Simon and Andrew, without even asking a question, drop their nets and follow Jesus, and in turn so do James and John, who as we learned last Sunday were later referred to as: The Sons of Thunder! .

Before we go any further with this story, we need to unpack some baggage. We need to release holding on to this story as literal truth, for whoever Mark was, he wasn't standing by the sea of Galilee that day to observe and record this conversation. We need to embrace the spiritual meaning (why is Mark telling this story and why is he telling it this way?). In order to find the fresh meaning of this story for us, we need to put aside some of the other interpretations that we may have heard in the past.

I have certainly heard this story used as an excuse for aggressive evangelism: go out there, young woman, and hook those unbelievers and reel them in to be saved. Or, even in my rather reserved, middle class suburban Lutheran church, this story was held up as a litmus test of my faith when I was an adolescent: if Jesus were to come by right now, Sandra, while you are out in your yard helping your parents rake the lawn at 416 NW Drive Silver Spring Maryland, if Jesus were to come by and say to you, Follow me, would you be able to drop your nets, leave everything behind, including your mother and father, and follow? So let's pack up all that old stuff and leave it behind.

This is, in and of itself, one way of understanding how we are called to leave our nets. One entanglement we often have is an old way of understanding scripture that becomes a sort of progressive, liberal fundamentalism, which can cause us to dismiss passages like this. Biblical stories, Biblical metaphor, is meant to be fresh and new every day. It's often easier for us to let it be old in every way, so that we can escape its call. So let's look at this passage with fresh eyes and ears to see how it may relate to our own spiritual path on our Lenten journey this year from the wilderness to Easter morning.

This story is a metaphor about what it means to be called as a disciple of Jesus. It is helpful for me to know that the word disciple, as it was used then, meant learner or apprentice in relationship with a teacher. It was a call to follow a spiritual guide in

teachings that translated into action, into the living of values. When Jesus asks Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him, he doesn't check their credentials or have a lengthy discussion of doctrine. Jesus just takes off immediately, as Mark says, with these four guys trailing along as Jesus goes to Capernaum, a fishing village along the Sea of Galilee. In the next 24 hours, Jesus teaches in the synagogue, casts out a demon from a possessed man, heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever and heals many others as well. Being a disciple of Jesus was action-oriented, was participating in teaching, healing and ministering to those in need.

By the way, it is worth noting that the word Christian appears exactly three times in the New Testament; however, the word disciple can be found 263 times throughout the New Testament. Jesus' call to us is a call of discipleship.

As I approach this story anew, I think of Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God being near and how we might turn around and transform something in the way we live our lives. What is our call? And what are the nets that entangle us in such a way that they keep us from living a life of meaning for ourselves and a life that is caring and loving toward others? When Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John to leave their nets, he's not just asking them to give up ice cream. What he's asking of them would be like asking you and me to give up the Internet. That's the kind of turning around and refocusing that Jesus suggests here.

What entangles me is a pace of life that is often coupled with a loop of repetitious thoughts which together can create so much distraction that I can't or don't focus on what I truly want to do and the spiritual path I long to follow. That's the net that I hear Jesus calling me to leave behind. Yet how familiar and how comfortable that net is; how tightly at times I hang onto it. I wear this wristband to remind me of the net I have chosen to release, to leave behind, for these next 40 days.

The second part of my Lenten journey is to live differently without that entanglement, to live my way into following that spiritual call of discipleship. I have chosen the practice living trustfully, part of which means releasing my fears and my repetitious thoughts, trusting my friends and family members, trusting the decisions I am making, especially decisions for my mother's care, trusting in my own future, and especially trusting God's call for me.

If you haven't already considered your Lenten journey and your Lenten practice, I invite you to pick up a copy of the Ash Wednesday service – and a purple wristband – and a purple card from the counter in the foyer. Utilize them to help you consider your call to leave your net behind and choose a way of living to follow this season.

The call to discipleship is as fresh today as it was when the Gospel of Mark was written. It is not a call to doctrine. The call to discipleship invites us to let go of business as usual in order to be released to live intentionally in ways that anticipate God's kin-dom here on earth right now – and that in fact can create moments of God's realm within us and among us and on this world, not in the hereafter, but now, in this Lent, in this season, in this Easter. Immediately (as Mark is fond of saying). Amen.