

Randall D. Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

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Mark 1:14-20

Follow Me!

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. And good morning to all of you who join us online from your homes. We worship in limited forms this morning, but we earnestly await a soon-coming time when normalcy returns. Let us pray: Earth-shattering and intimate God, we hear you calling as you did to your disciples two thousand years ago. Give us the strength to turn and follow even when the ties of work and family are difficult to stretch. Lead us and inspire us as we follow you on this journey. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, my sermon centered on the beginning of the gospel narrative of Mark with the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John and a reflection on how my faith journey may have begun most profoundly with my own baptism when I was in 6th grade. I made a few comments in my previous sermon about verse 14. I wondered about how Mary and Elizabeth felt about their sons' involvement in a zealous religious movement in Judea and how fear of the political and culture elite in Jerusalem probably worried the two mothers. Elizabeth's son John was arrested by the Jewish king Herod Antipas for speaking out against his marital debacles. Not to mention, to the religious authorities in Jerusalem, John was a threat as well. By baptizing people in the Jordan River in preparation for God's soon-coming arrival, John was claiming that people could repent and be cleansed by not participating in the temple sacrificial rituals. John saw the religious and political leaders in Jerusalem as corrupted and complicit in the exile that had continued since the Babylonians had wiped out Jerusalem almost 600 years previous.

For the majority of Jews, as long as there was a foreign government ruling and controlling their lives and demanding their allegiance, they were still in exile though they at least were living in their homeland. The Roman Empire showed the average person in Galilee that someone other than Israel's God Yahweh, the true King and Lord of Israel and by extension the cosmos, was really in charge. John was convinced that someone was coming as God's Messiah soon and that the people needed to be ready for that moment. After Jesus leaves John at the Jordan River, he spends 40 days in the wilderness, an echo of the 40 years that the people of Israel spent in the wilderness in preparation to enter the promised land. After John is arrested, Jesus then begins his ministry in Galilee, the region surrounding his hometown of Nazareth. Note again that Jesus begins spreading his message far from the center of religious and political power in Palestine, the city of Jerusalem where the temple was.

When reading the book of Mark, one might think that the author was so excited that he could hardly contain the words flowing from his hands onto the parchment. Verse 14 starts with "now," and verses 18 and 20 both begin with "immediately" almost as if Mark is trying to keep his audience sitting on the edge of their seats, waiting for the next piece of the story. Jesus enters the scene as the main protagonist, the central figure, the son of God, the person that all of Israel had been waiting for. His message is good news, the gospel, of what God is doing in the world through him. Some early manuscripts say that Jesus is proclaiming the gospel of God, while other manuscripts say the gospel of the kingdom. You might think this is a small difference, but remember that the most powerful kingdom at the time was the Roman Empire. Someone walking around the countryside proclaiming a different political order or kingdom would be an immediate threat to the power of Rome and any other powers that Rome had endorsed or installed. Listening ears would hear Jesus's words and immediately think of Messiah.

Most people thought Messiah would be a might conqueror, a national hero and leader. This leader was expected to violently vanquish Israel's enemies and reinstate the nation of Israel as God's chosen people with God at their center in the temple in Jerusalem. This leader would set up his new throne in the palace of King David in Jerusalem and cleanse the temple of all of its corruption and priestly imposters. Israel was waiting on their new king, but Jesus does not always fulfill their anticipation like they think he should. Can you relate? How often does God not fulfill your request or need in the ways that you would expect God to?

In Mark 1:14-20, Jesus is the only speaker. When Jesus speaks, everything responds. As the voice of God rang out across the cosmos in Genesis 1 and the entire universe came into being, or as the tiny atoms that make up our universe responded to the mighty spoken word, so also did the ears of Galilee respond to Jesus. Mark outlines his message with 6 parts or pieces that are all loaded with meaning for the time period, in which Mark's gospel would have been written as well as the cultural climate of Jesus's own ministry.

In verse 15 of Mark 1, Jesus begins with his first loaded phrase, "the time is fulfilled." What Israel has been waiting for is finally here. Exile is coming to an end. Their god, Yahweh, the great and powerful creator and King of the universe is going to act in the midst of her people as she did in times past when he led the people out of Egypt, setting them free from slavery and making them a people set apart for showing the nations how the world was supposed to be. The time has come, and Jesus is telling everyone about it. What a lot of readers of the gospels, Matthew Mark Luke and John, do not realize though is that Jesus was not the first to be wandering around the back country of Palestine with this message, nor would he be the last one to do so either. There are records from this time period showing that several people came, claiming to be Messiah and attempting to start God's kingdom on earth for the people of Israel.

Mark's claim in his gospel though is that this Messiah, the Nazarene craftsman from Galilee, is different, which you will find out in the rest of Mark's story.

So, everyone's ears perk up when they hear the time is fulfilled. Jesus then gives his second key piece of information: the kingdom of God, the rule and reign of God, is at hand or is arriving in the midst of us. The people, of course, do not realize in that moment that Jesus is speaking of himself. The kingdom is coming, is arriving in the person Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth. Watch and listen closely because God's kingdom is not what you would expect to see or hear. You might miss it. Embodied in Jesus, God's kingdom is made real through the actions and teaching of Jesus, what Mark fills the rest of his gospel with after this passage.

The third part of Jesus's message in Mark 1:15 is a command. Jesus tells the people to respond in the only appropriate way for this moment in Israel's history. REPENT! Make a 180 degree turn because the way that the people of Israel are going and have been going is not the way that God is calling them. God is speaking to the people through Jesus, showing them that the kingdom that they have been waiting for is happening, is coming into reality in their very midst, on their doorstep. Repentance is not only a change in thinking or an awareness that the way that one is going may not be the right way. Repentance is also action. The prophets had predicted that when Messiah came, everything would change. Jesus is telling them that what they've heard before, what has been predicted is coming to its fulfillment or is happening right here and right now. The Kingdom of God, the rule and reign of God is breaking into the world through the work and word of Jesus of Nazareth. Repent!

Jesus first statement then is completed with the 4th piece of Jesus's message in verse 15. Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and... believe in this good news or gospel." Jesus is calling us to turn our lives around and believe the good news that

he is bringing, which is that we're not alone in this, in our brokenness and shame and disfunction and sin and hatred and greed and hopelessness. The kingdom of God is here. Believe it, and act. Replace those doubts and fears about the way that the world has been unjust and begin working toward a different kind of world, the world that Jesus is bringing into reality in your midst.

We find out that belief in this good news leads to all kinds of unexpected outcomes for the people who thought they knew what God would look like or what God would do when she would return to save her people. Mark's gospel begins with Jesus's announcement and then fulfills Jesus announcement in the following chapters. Jesus backs up his word with action. The new kingdom is here and it is not filled with more money or bigger houses or unending consumption or taller buildings or bigger churches or better weapons. The kingdom of God is filled with the very people that we would not expect: the blind man who has sat on the side of the road begging for years; the leper who lives outside of town because no one will go near her; the fishermen who give up their family business and security; the mentally ill or demon-possessed who wander the dark valleys and lonely areas of the wilderness crying out in agony; and the traitorous tax collectors, desperate to stay in good graces with the ruling authorities and their neighbors. Believe the good news that the kingdom of God is in our midst, transforming the brokenness and sin around us and in us so that we can invite others into this transformation.

As Jesus wanders the Galilean countryside, telling everyone the good news, he comes to the Sea of Galilee and finds two families of fishermen. The first two fisherman that he encounters, Peter and Andrew, are casting their net into the water to pull in a catch, and Jesus speaks for the second time. "Follow me," he shouts from the shore. Mark writes that the two brothers hear Jesus and respond immediately. Jesus then comes upon James, his brother John, their father Zebedee, and the hired men that are working alongside them. Jesus calls James and

John as well to follow him. I'm guessing that they have heard of Jesus of Nazareth by now. So, when the rabbi Jesus tells them to follow him, he is asking them to join him and learn from his teaching as he continues to move about Galilee. Three of the four brothers will become Jesus's inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John, so Mark probably begins with the calling of these 4 because of the special relationship that three of them had with their teacher and friend.

I wonder too in this moment as Peter, Andrew, James, and John leave their work and their families if Mark is not using them as examples of what the rest of Jesus's disciples left behind in order to join Jesus in his mission. Jesus's call to these young men is also a call to what, in their young and ambitious minds, could become power and prestige. When the people hear Jesus talk about the kingdom of God, they are fully expecting that sooner or later Jesus will make a full assault on Jerusalem, attempting to liberate the city and by extension the nation of Israel, from the Romans. So, when the young men leave their families and work to follow Jesus, some of their interest is self-serving as well. When Jesus takes over Jerusalem, each of the disciples might get a city to call their own or a particular large farm estate to manage for the new royalty. Make no mistakes, we hear follow me and because of our distance from the story and the politics of Jesus's time, we hear something totally different than what the disciples would have thought, which is also why when you read further into the gospels, you might notice how the disciples struggle to understand Jesus when he tries to teach them more about the kingdom.

Jesus's final statement is in verse 17: "I will make you fish for people." Jesus is not interested in keeping this message or the power of the kingdom to himself or to his growing group of followers. Jesus wants to equip his disciples and teach them so that they can in turn tell other people the good news of the in-breaking kingdom of God. The message can only be shared.

So now we understand some of the full weight of the beginning of Jesus's first words in ministry. I don't think that the first words that I spoke in my ministry experience were quite as powerful as what Jesus brought. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the good news. Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Jesus is calling us today with the same words, with the same message. As an anabaptist, I like to think of my relationship with Jesus as a follower, more than a believer, but I think the repentance and belief that Jesus calls out of us comes naturally as we follow alongside or behind him. And that is exactly what happens to the disciples. At certain points, they do miss what Jesus is trying to explain to them, and when Jesus ends up at his trial and later death in Jerusalem, it seems like the disciples have lost all hope of any kingdom coming, highlighted by their deserting their leader in his most dire moments. But the kingdom again surprises the disciples and brings the unexpected to the forefront. Jesus's resurrection turns those deserting and cowardly disciples into the kingdom heralds that Jesus prepared them to be. And they take the gospel even farther than Jesus did, embodying the kingdom across the Roman empire, proclaiming that the true Lord and Savior of the world is not Caesar, but Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Christ.

I think about Peter, Andrew, James, and John later in life after they have become leaders in the early church and after they have witnessed the resurrected Jesus. Did they reflect on the journey that had gotten them where they were? Did they ask themselves what would have happened if they had stayed with the family business, fishing in the Sea of Galilee? Could they feel in their hearts, in their bones the call of Jesus when he said "Follow me?" Leaving home and family and business and work is not easy, especially when it is something that you have grown up doing and being a part of. But when Jesus calls, do we stop long enough to listen, to consider what Jesus is asking? That was the decision and discernment that Morgan and I came to, when

we felt Jesus calling us to Hutterthal. Could we really leave behind work and family to follow along on this journey? Are we really hearing Jesus? I wonder if the young men that Jesus called on the shores of the sea of Galilee had similar fears and thoughts too. What did Zebedee say when James and John walked away? Who would take over the family business now? Could not Jesus be calling us to where we already are, to the businesses and operations that have shaped us and molded us into who we are? I think Jesus does do that, but I also know that God's kingdom continues breaking into our reality today. God's kingdom is not concerned with my personal kingdom-building attempts because God's kingdom is not built by expected or traditional methods just like it wasn't in first-century Palestine. The kingdom looked totally different to the disciples when they were following Jesus. So, when Jesus calls us to repent, believe, and follow him, we must prepare ourselves for the unexpected and the earth-shattering, because God's kingdom is not our kingdom.

Let us pray: Powerful and personal God, we thank you that you have begun something in our midst, that your kingdom is breaking into our lives in us and through us as we seek to live out your kingdom come, your will be done. Give us the eyes to see and the ears to hear your call as we seek to follow you. Give us discerning hearts and minds. Prepare us for the unexpected and the upside-down nature of your kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen