

We're still in the season of Epiphany where we're reminded that Christ's coming signals the inbreaking of God's kingdom, and we're still at the water's edge- just not at the river Jordan but rather at the Sea of Galilee. Today's gospel reading in Mark is one of four Gospel accounts of the call stories of the first disciples. Each varies a good bit in their descriptions. In Mark what takes place before today's story is a short account of Jesus' baptism and temptation by the devil for forty days in the wilderness. Today we find Jesus out of the wilderness and thrust into his first and foundational acts of his ministry: preaching the good news of the coming of God's kingdom, and calling his first disciples- two sets of fishermen brothers. For these brothers, following Jesus meant leaving their familiar work behind and embracing a new vision for their own lives and the world. These disciples are first called to step into that 'widening circle of light' and then step out in faith and share the light with others" (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage*). Let us turn now to God's word but first let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in the Gospel of Mark 1:14-20. **READ.**

All Mark tells us is that John the Baptist has been arrested. We don't know why until later. Mark isn't known for details. John's imprisonment is a pivotal moment here, as until now the focus has been on the ministry and message of John. Nonetheless, his arrest opens the way for Jesus to begin his mission and ministry. For Mark, the good news of God (v. 14) is the good news about Jesus. Jesus traveled to Galilee, known for its farming and fishing, which was mainly sustained predominantly on the backs of the poor. That's right...fishing was a thankless, low-paying job. I saw a story on the national news last week where shrimpers in Charleston are going out of business due to China importing their farmed raise

shrimp for much cheaper. Many aren't even breaking even. Fishing is a messy, stinky job and back when today's story takes place, everyone worked for Caesar, even fisherfolk. "Peasants reaped none of the benefits Rome bestowed on the Jewish political and social elites in the south. Instead, their labor fueled an economy that kept them at the lowest economic and social strata of ancient Palestinian society" (*The New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, p. 177). As a matter of fact, some scholars say that "the Roman Empire tightly controlled the fishing industry through a series of high taxes and licensing fees, which took money from the working class and transferred it to the elites" (Robert Williamson, Jr., www.politicaltheology.com). Under Caesar's reign one was told what to do and where to work. And the fisherfolk- well, they would get no profit from their fishing since Caesar functionally owned the lake and all the creatures in it. The best of the catch literally belonged to him and the rest of the catch was sold or went to feed their families.

It is here- in this environment- that Jesus comes and preaches God's life-giving, liberating, justice-filled good news, saying, 'Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news" (vv. 14-15). Jesus preaches the coming of God's reign because it was time for Jesus' mission to begin. "The opportunity was ripe. The Holy Spirit possessed Jesus. He had heard God's calling and affirmation as God's beloved. With angelic help, he had passed Satan's tests guided by his commitment to a ministry of self-giving, enemy-loving faithfulness. Jesus was ready and now- now!- others needed to be ready, too" (workingpreacher.org, Matt Skinner). You can almost feel a sense of urgency, can't you?! God's kingdom, which is the central theme of Jesus' teaching in Mark,

is interpreted more as a sphere of influence than a physical place. Jesus' public ministry is a demonstration of this new way of being in this world. Mark shows us that God's kingdom has both social and economic implications. For Mark and for us, the coming of God's reign is the very real hope, rooted in Jewish thought, that God's power will soon overwhelm worldly powers. Walking the water's edge, preaching good news with this urgent, no-nonsense, call to action, Jesus sees two fishermen, Simon and Andrew, throwing nets into the sea. "Come, Follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people," Jesus said. These two brothers went "right away," leaving their nets and following him. "Simon and Andrew weren't middle class. They didn't run a successful business. Maybe they owned their own boat instead of renting it. But most likely not. They weren't even what we think of as working class. They were peasants on the bottom rungs of an extractive and abusive system" (Bass).

Next Jesus, Simon and Andrew encountered another set of brothers, James and John, Zebedee's boys, who were busy repairing their nets. "At the very moment" when Jesus called them, they also followed him, leaving their father and his hired hands behind in the boat (v. 20). Some scholars gather from the text that "James and John must have had at least enough economic status to *hire* day laborers rather than *being* day laborers. While the term "middle class" was not a concept in the ancient world, Jesus's first disciples seem to have occupied a social status we might recognize as roughly lower to middle class" (Williamson). You can say that they swam in a sea of injustice (Bass). "The implication is that following Jesus will transform their economic lives. No longer will they be "fishers of fish," participating in the exploitative Roman fishing trade. Instead they will become

“fishers of people,” participating in God’s economy of abundant life for all humankind” (Williamson). This new direction is one that does not push people into exile but gathers them together instead.

Some scholars argue that “we narrow and distort the radical nature of this text when we interpret it as an invitation to issue altar calls. “Many Christians read Jesus’ call to discipleship as though he were a representative of some heavenly Fish and Game Commission, inviting us into a lifetime of sport-fishing for lost souls, scooping up people like mackerel and tossing them into the ice chest of salvation. Yet Jesus was not a bass pro, and the gospel is not a competitive sport. Jesus has something far more profound in mind” (Williamson). Jesus isn’t talking about filling pews or baptismal fonts: “he is hearkening back to the Hebrew scriptures, in which ‘the hooking of fish’ is a euphemism for judgment upon the rich (Amos 4:2) and the powerful (Ezekiel 29:4)” (*Binding the Strong Man*, Ched Myers). When Jesus tells these brothers that he will show them how to “fish for people,” “he is asking them to cast aside the existing social order of power, privilege, exploitation, and domination, and to help usher in God’s kingdom- a kingdom of justice for the poor, mercy for the oppressed, and abundance for all. Maybe Jesus is inviting commoners ‘to a fundamental reordering of socio-economic relationships’ (Myers)- to a new and God-honoring way of life that blesses all people” (www.journeywithjesus.net, Debie Thomas). Think about that for a minute. Now doesn’t that sound like a sphere of influence where God reigns?

These four disciples immediately leave their nets to follow Jesus. Does this mean that these were “men of superhuman courage and prophetic foreknowledge? Of

course not! They weren't heroes of the faith. These are the same guys who later in the Gospel doubt, deny, and abandon Jesus. They're as fallible and as ordinary as the rest of us, and their own volition can't get them very far. No, they immediately follow Jesus because Jesus makes it possible for them to do so" (Thomas). Jesus is the one who initiates the relationship. Jesus is the one who speaks to them with a metaphor they get and gives them a job they can do. Yet, even still, these first disciples respond in a stark, radical, and mysterious way. "The call to discipleship here is presented not as something chosen by the disciples, but as the decisive, commanding act of Jesus" (*Connections*, Stan Saunders). It is the power of God that moves them to immediately respond. Emma just sang an old church camp favorite of mine, "I Have Decided To Follow Jesus," yet it is only the power of God that moves them and us to immediately respond. It is also the love and assurance of a God who will never leave us that equips and sustains us on their journey. As one scholar said, "These brothers had probably waited their entire lives for such an invitation. They'd been entangled in Roman fishing line far too long. It wasn't hard to drop Caesar's nets and pick up the hooks of God" (Bass).

I've only tried fishing with a net once, and it was unproductive- terrible, even. I was trying to catch shrimp- "trying" being the operative word. I caught other things but not shrimp. I was visiting with a parishioner this past week with whom I have permission to share. I asked him what gave him life, and he replied, "fishing." He proceeded to tell me that every year for as long as he can remember he's been going and renewing his fishing license so that he can be legal, but he never gets around to actually going fishing. "How long has it been since you've

been fishing?" I asked. He said, "Wow, I think maybe ten years or so?" Without me asking anything but leaving room for silence, he said, "I guess it's the alcohol keeping me from fishing." For him fishing is a metaphor for life- something that gives him life and where he finds freedom, yet he is in a comfortable hell- not ready to quite get in the boat or in his case not ready to even come to the shore. He buys the license every year- renewing with the hope that he will experience life one day. What is it that gets in your way of following Jesus? What's keeping you in or from getting in the boat? What or who has you hooked? What is your place of comfort, safety and ease? It could be a place of misery yet somehow you've gotten comfortable in your own misery and injustice. A comfortable hell that you're in and Jesus may be urgently inviting you out of your "comfort" to follow him.

I imagine that these fisherfolk's nets-while in use- would be thrown into the sea and drawn back out, hauling in whatever fish were in its path. "Fishing with such a net was not a precision operation. Rather, it was a general gathering in of whatever fish were in the area, whether 'desirable' or not. Isn't it the same in the kingdom of God? For Jesus to call his disciples "fishers of people" suggests a similarly broad casting operation to gather people into God's reign. The gospel is a broad net. It is good news for everyone, from the greatest to the least. From the [big cities] to the backwater regions like Galilee. Everyone is invited into God's beloved community. All fish- edible and inedible- brown, blue, gray, green- all are a part of God's kingdom. The disciples are to cast their nets wide and to welcome whoever may be brought in" (Williamson). Simon, Andrew, James and John trusted God at work through Jesus' command to trust the good news and to

follow. They were caught up in the net of God's love. Jesus invites them and now us to fish for people: "people who are caught in the nets of exploitation, corruption, poverty, war, exile, addiction, homelessness, violence, disease, and all the isms. What might count as Good News for those ensnared by such brokenness and cruelty" (Thomas)? What is the Good News for all of us here and now? Jesus preaches, "Now is the time! Here comes God's reign- trust this good news!" As Christ's disciples, we are called away from the world's system of economics that says some lives have more value than others to a new way of thinking about economics: the economics of God's kingdom where every human being is a person of intrinsic worth (Williamson). That was then and this is now. Christ continues to call. Remember...God alone delivers. God alone captures the imagination. God alone makes the vision of God's kingdom come alive in a human soul. All we can do is trust and obey Christ's call, joining in on God's work of liberation and love. The rest is up to God. Jesus commands us, "Come, and follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people." Regardless of the cost, may we be open to the Spirit's nudge or shove, get out of our boat, drop our nets, and follow Jesus into a new way of living! Amen.