

We're still in the season of Epiphany where we're reminded that Christ's coming signals the inbreaking of God's kingdom. 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. In today's scripture 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. 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. If you didn't already know, 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 by the labor of peasants. "These 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). It is here- in this environment- that Jesus comes and preaches God's 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 time for a new direction or a new intensity had arrived. "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 satanic tests guided by his commitment to a ministry of self-giving, enemy-loving faithfulness. Jesus was ready and now- now!- others needed to be, too" (workingpreacher.org, Matt Skinner). You can almost feel the 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 (in Mark's case, Rome). 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," Jesus said, and these two brothers went "right away," leaving their nets and following him. They soon 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 middle class. The implication is that following Jesus will transform their economic lives. No longer will they be “fishermen 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 Simon, Andrew, James and John 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 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. No hesitation, no questions asked- they followed Jesus, leaving not only their job but their family business behind. While Jesus has an urgent, time-sensitive message, he doesn't offer any other details. Jesus does not spend a lot of time analyzing the big picture, either. He is more intent on telling them and us God's picture of the world: a world where God is near and God's power is at work, so hear this good news and follow me. Had I been one of those disciples, I confess that I would've had some questions. Wouldn't you? Questions such as: Where are we going? Who are you again? Where's John? When will we be back home? How long? When I was a child, my mom tells me that I wouldn't go to bed until I knew the plans for the next day, accompanied by many follow-up questions concerning all the details and who was going to be involved. That's how I'm wired. Does this mean that these were "men of superhuman courage and prophetic foreknowledge? Of course not. 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 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. It is also the love and assurance of a God who will never leave them that equips and sustains them on their journey.

Mark tells us that Simon and Andrew were throwing fishing nets into the sea when Jesus walked by. 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 imagine that these fishermen's nets 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 the beloved community. 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. Jesus invites them and now us to fish for people: "people who are caught in the nets of exploitation, corruption, poverty, war, exile, homelessness, violence, disease, climate change, racism, and sexism. 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). 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." Trusting God at work in this world, may we all lean into this promise today and always! Amen.