

January 20, 2024  
Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year B  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Jonah 3:1-5, 10*

*Psalms 62:6-14*

*1 Corinthians 7:29-31*

*Mark 1:14-20*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father,  
and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, there is a sense of urgency that permeates the readings. We see Jonah, as he slogs his way across the vast city of Nineveh (the one in present-day Iraq, not the one in Johnson County), shouting out to warn any who would listen, *Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*

Paul writes to the church at Corinth that *the appointed time has grown short...the present form of this world is passing away.*

And then we get to Mark, who I think of as the evangelist with sharp elbows, who bursts in with “just the facts, ma’am.” Today, with a few strokes of the pencil, Mark gives us two tiny sketches, each bursting with tension and urgency.

With the very first phrase, we’re off like a shot: *After John was arrested.* In just four words, Mark places us in a specific time, and supplies a full backstory of the conflict between John the Baptist and Herod Antipas. Then four more words: *Jesus came to Galilee,* and yet four more: *proclaiming the good news.*

It’s almost like a telegram. John arrested, stop. Jesus to Galilee, stop. Proclaims good news, full stop. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Then, Mark keeps up the pace, and we hear Jesus deliver his first, and shortest, sermon: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.* When is the last time any of us heard a sermon that was that short? Already, as you can tell, not today.

Then, without a breath, Mark leaps into the next vignette, where we see Jesus calling Simon and Andrew, James and John. Once again, quick little pencil strokes provide us with name, occupation, and kinship.

This short scene features Mark’s trademark word, “immediately.” In the Greek, it sounds even more abrupt and urgent: *εὐθύς (euthys),* And we hear it not once, but twice: *εὐθύς ...εὐθύς.*

Well, let's take a moment to catch our breath, shall we? Last week, I mentioned that we would be hearing a lot about call in this season of Epiphany. Today, we add another stone to the foundation of our life in Christ – Kingdom.

Too often, then and now, the kingdom of God has been mistaken for something made by human hands. Too often, then and now, the kingdom of God has been mistaken for one nation or another, one denomination or another, or – just as destructive and idolatrous – one political party or another.

I have a friend who likes to say, “Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom, and we have settled for the Church.” It may sound a little harsh, but it makes the point that what Jesus is announcing is not a minimal realignment of geopolitical alliances, or a little shift in hierarchical arrangements in society. Rather, the kingdom that Jesus is proclaiming is an entirely new way of understanding relationship...with God, with each other, and with our deepest selves.

We, like Jesus' first hearers, ask, “so, just what is this kingdom thing?” Unlike what you might assume from much of the political rhetoric in our day, Jesus never answers this question. Jesus never says, “the kingdom of God is.” Instead, he says, “the kingdom of God is like...” and then usually tells a parable – about mustard seeds, or lamps lighted, or a prodigal son come home.

In these parables of Jesus we hear that, for some, the kingdom will be hard to enter, for others it will remain invisible, while for still others it's as easy as child's play. Clearly, this is not a kingdom in the usual sense.

The kingdom Jesus is talking about is any time or any place that God's power is seen and felt – where love, genuine love is present. It's that simple.

The kingdom of God is present whenever and wherever people act selflessly for the good of others. The kingdom of God is present when you allow your God-given abilities and the deep needs of others to intersect. The kingdom of God is present when you are on the receiving end of someone's kindness...and when you offer such kindness to others. And that goes double for mercy, and triple for forgiveness.

This, my friends, is the kingdom that Jesus tells us has come near. OK, but where is near? It's right there, like that restaurant in Venice I told you about recently, just waiting for you to turn around and see that it's always been there. The kingdom of God is within you, and within the one sitting next to you – you just have to look with the eyes of your heart. The kingdom of God can always be found among the last, the least, and the lost, shining like a bright new penny, and worth the world.

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In Mark's gospel, Jesus appears in Galilee, proclaiming that this kingdom of God has come near. Immediately, he begins to recruit others to help carry that good news, that gospel.

I suspect that Jesus was not a stranger to these four fisherfolk, that they had been listening to him for some time. Even so, Mark emphasizes the urgency of this call of Jesus to “follow me” and the immediacy of their response. They left their nets and followed. Did they have exceptional courage, or the ability to see the future? Of course not. These are the same people who will later doubt, deny, and abandon Jesus. They are as ordinary as the rest of us.

Barbara Brown Taylor talks about this gospel reading as a miracle story. Simon, Andrew, James and John (and all of the others) follow Jesus immediately because Jesus makes it possible for them to do so. “This is not a story about us,” Taylor writes. “It is a story about God, and about God’s ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who are able to follow — able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for and because he seems to be food.”<sup>1</sup>

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So, what about us? Does Jesus call us? Of course. But when? When all is calm, all is bright? Perhaps, but not only then. A well-known hymn reminds us that: *Jesus calls us; o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea.*

Do any of you feel like you’re in a boat, adrift, in the middle of a storm? It sounds like where we live right now, doesn’t it? Today, then, must surely be the day that we *hear his clear voice sounding, saying, “Christian, follow me.”*

And then what? Pardon the pun, but let’s not allow our nets to get all tangled up in the notion of fishing for people. It is too easy to think that this is about earning merit badges for fishing. It is too easy to think that this is about us, that we have the power to “hook” or to “catch” others for God. We do not.

I realize that many of our Christian siblings use such language as “how many souls have you brought to Christ?” But I believe this gets the power dynamic exactly backwards. “Follow me” is not a directive we give to others; it is not promise we make to God; “follow me” is a promise (and an invitation) that God makes to us.

It is God alone who captures the imagination. It is God alone who makes the vision of the kingdom come alive in a human soul. Your task is to embody the vision of God’s kingdom in the particulars of your life. The rest is up to God.

Given the texts before us today, I had planned to talk about call and kingdom. It wasn’t until yesterday, when the restored figures in the Rood Screen were reinstalled, that I realized that we sit in the shadow of Jesus final earthly call, this one from the Cross. We read in in John 19 (26-27), *When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he*

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Miracle on the Beach” p. 40.

*loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

Although we tend to think of this story only on Good Friday, how fortunate we are to be reminded every week of this scene, the perfect union of call and kingdom, an invitation to step into a new relationship of mutual, unselfish love and care.

A couple of years back, there was a slogan on the MadJax sign that read: "There is work in the world only you can make." This is why God calls you, and you, and you. The work that you are each called to is to witness to those places where God's love is becoming fully present and invite others to share in that experience.

My friends, the time is now. This very moment. In this place and at this hour, the kingdom of God is at hand. Look up. Look out and around. Believe, and tell, the Good News. Immediately. Amen.