

### **1 Kings 19:19-21**

<sup>19</sup> So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. <sup>20</sup> Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye," he said, "and then I will come with you." "Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?" <sup>21</sup> So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.

### **Mark 1:14-20**

<sup>14</sup> After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

<sup>16</sup> As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." <sup>18</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>19</sup> When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. <sup>20</sup> Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

## Come Follow Me, For the Time is Now

Last week we looked at the baptism of Jesus. Today we introduce the ministry of Jesus, as presented to us in Mark's Gospel. Mark's style is so frustratingly brief; I wish he had provided more details! Some people, at this point, would leap to the other gospels for additional information. But that is cheating if we are studying Mark's account – which is the main lectionary gospel for this year. So let us resist that temptation and explore the text we have, and in so doing appreciate what Mark is stressing.

After Jesus' baptism and being tested for 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus presumably returned to his hometown of Nazareth. And John continued his ministry in the wilderness of "preparing the way of the Lord." I mentioned last week that John boldly testified against the corruption within society. Indeed, John was arrested was for speaking out against King Herod Antipas, who was the local king of Galilee and the son of Herod the Great from Matthew's Christmas story. Mark makes no mention of the details in today's reading; he presumably assumes that all his readers knew about the events that he relates later in Mark 6:14-29. This is what Mark writes:

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Not only are we pivoting from the wilderness to Galilee, but Mark first introduces Jesus to his readers as a *preacher*. And the message Jesus proclaims is the "Good News of the [Kingdom of] God." At this point, Mark does not really explain what that is, or what it means; we will have to be patient and see how this unfolds throughout the rest of the gospel, and throughout 2018. Mark's brief summary here can be understood as both an *announcement* and an *appeal*.

Jesus announces that "the time has come" or "the time has drawn near" for "the kingdom of God is at hand." In the New Testament, there are two words for time. One is *chronos*, from which we get chronology, which speaks of years, months, and days, of calendars and clocks. The other is *kairos*, which calls attention to a special time, an opportune time, a significant moment in time. In a secular context, consider the "(hashtag) me too" movement against sexual harassment and assault, especially in the workplace. This began following the downfall of movie producer Harvey Weinstein in October last year. It may be that future historians will connect this moral awakening with the seemingly coincidental death of Hugh Hefner, the founder of Playboy magazine, who died just one week earlier. In our case, Mark – with the benefit of hindsight – sees the arrest of John as the trigger for Jesus' ministry to begin. Mark claims this is a *kairos* moment, it is *God's timing*; God is doing something new, namely, "God's kingdom has come near," it is "at hand." In other words *God* is taking the initiative and steps into history in a decisive way. The way Mark's narrative presents it, Jesus announces the imminent appearance of the kingdom and then the rest of his gospel demonstrates what that in-breaking kingdom looks like through Jesus' powerful words and mighty deeds.

In addition to Jesus' announcement, there is an *appeal*: "repent, believe in the gospel." The first word, "repent" is the same message that John preached, showing there is continuity between Jesus and John. Not only are we called to turn away from other things that demand our loyalty and allegiance, we are also called to "believe the good news that the kingdom of God is arriving." In other words, not just to *hear* the message but to believe it, have faith in it, bank our lives on it. Why, because where Jesus Christ is – or is being preached - there the kingdom of God is actively at work, *God's time is being fulfilled*. (PAUSE: Allow me to go on an important tangent here!)

Today, we often struggle with the notion that the whole life, death, and resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the reign of God. We just have to look around us and see the mess that the world continues to be in, along with our own experience of the struggles of life, and we wonder is this really what the reign of God looks like? Has something gone wrong? Is Jesus still reigning? What is going on? These are complicated questions, and we are not going to resolve them today in one short sermon! My response here has elements of both mystery and faith. There are both "now and not-yet" elements to the kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus *has* introduced it, and Mark's gospel will spell out what that looks like, but God's reign will not be *complete* until the fullness of time and Christ returns in glory. It has only "drawn near." In that sense there is a *hiddenness* or a *mystery* to the kingdom of God. After all, God's kingdom includes Good Friday and it "is *not* of this world," so it won't look like an earthly kingdom based on power and dominance. And so there is also an element of *faith*, in that the kingdom of God will only be completely made manifest at another special *kairos* moment, Christ's coming. We live, then, with some frustration in this "now-and-not-yet" reign of God. We are in the vulnerable position of being caught between two ages: knowing enough of the coming age to yearn for it, along with the rest of a groaning creation, while continuing to be assaulted by the principalities and powers of the old age of the flesh – as Paul might put it. Yes, the kingdom of God "is at hand," but it is *still in the process of arriving*. Evil is to be only finally destroyed only at the end of time, and until then we live by faith, and in the hope provided by the resurrection. (*End of tangent!*)

As soon as Jesus announces the kingdom of God, he calls persons to enter it. Jesus wants to create community of people who embody the kingdom of God. God is doing a new thing and is calling new people to bring it about. This calling has wide ranging implications for doctrines of the church and its proclamation, the Christian life, and even the person and work of Christ. Yes, the cross is the basis of our salvation, but *following Jesus* constitutes our life in the kingdom of God. I want to explore a few aspects of this call this morning.

First, Jesus simply says to them, "Follow me." He did not say "I have a new theological outlook that I would like you to investigate" or "I have an ethical system I would like to discuss with you." Nor did Jesus ask them for allegiance to a new political agenda, or adherence to a novel type of spirituality. He just said, "Follow me." It is a call to a relationship with Jesus the Messiah, one which results in a profound loyalty and mutual commitment. While some people can *think* themselves into Christianity,

for many it is like falling in *love*. It is both as simple and as complicated as that! When you fall in love, your devotion causes you to follow them to the ends of the world, which is precisely what the disciples subsequently did.

Second, in the Old Testament we read of a lot of “call stories”: the call of Abram to go to a new land, the call of Moses from the burning bush, the story of Gideon and the fleece, the call of the boy Samuel, and the visionary call stories of prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.<sup>1</sup> Amos was a shepherd when God called him; Elisha was plowing a field when Elijah called him - as we heard this morning in the Old Testament reading. Each story is very different because the recipients were – like us - all very different as people. In certain cases, there is some discussion, or doubts to be addressed, in others - like that of Samuel - there is a simple obedience. The baptism of Jesus could, therefore, be seen in category of divine “call story.” And now we read of the call stories of some of the key disciples: Peter and Andrew, and James and John. When Jesus called them, they were busy fishing - following in the family business. They were called to simply follow Jesus, and to bear witness to him.

Third, how did they *respond*? Mark’s emphasis is on one word, “*immediately*”; they left their nets and followed him *at once*.” By this call and response the kingdom of God is actualized. Although these disciples respond immediately, it is just the beginning of their journey. Ahead for them - and for us - there is still much to learn, and this will involve stumbling, misunderstanding, and even going backwards at times. Becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a *moment* and a *lifetime*. In Mark’s Gospel, he shows the ups and downs of the disciples, and how they need to be reaffirmed and corrected time and time again. We all need to take encouragement from that.

*Our* response, if we are honest, is not always “immediate.” We hesitate, we try to find excuses, we procrastinate. But God patiently invites people to come into his kingdom and follow him. Not only does Jesus call strangers, he also calls those *within* the community of faith into ministries of various kinds. While many of you witnessed my ordination back in December, it would be a mistake to think that God’s call only applies to full-time Christian service. Prior to becoming a minister, I believe that God had called me to be a physics professor. So, in a sense, God was only calling me to serve him in a new capacity. I believe God calls *each of us* into a community of disciples and he has a role for each one of us, according to the gifts and talents that God has given us. We are all called, each differently and in-keeping with our unique personalities, to further the kingdom of God with the help of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the kingdom of God is not to be simply equated with the church; it is *bigger* than that. The kingdom of God is to be made present in the place where we work, in our home, within our circles of friends, in all that we do with our time. The church, of course, is to be *a kingdom of God community* that naturally overflows with the love of God, in line with St. Andrew’s mission statement. In building up *this* faith community, I’m sure some of you have a lot to offer in that regard, in which case let us explore that together in the months ahead. But above all, we are called into discipleship, to

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<sup>1</sup> Abram (Gen 12); Moses (Exod 3); Gideon (Judges 6); Samuel (1 Sam 3); Isaiah (Isa 6); Jeremiah (Jer 1); Ezekiel (Ezek 2).

follow Jesus, which is both collective *and* individual. And that is challenging, because it is a journey of faith and adventure - and we don't know precisely where it is going to end up!

In summary, there is evidently a connection between the preaching of Jesus and the arrival of the kingdom of God, one that mandates preachers everywhere to proclaim Christ's message in every new time. The theologian Rudolf Bultmann put it this way: "Whenever the gospel is preached, the reign of God draws near to those who hear it and calls them to decision." In the case of the four fishermen, the *immediacy* of their response indicates it was right time for them; it was a divine appointment. What about you? Is this your *kairos* time? Is there something you believe God wants you to do, but you keep putting off for no good reason? If so, and *without being irresponsible*, recognise that God's Spirit might be gently prodding you again to act appropriately. Your time to respond might be now. Don't run away from God's call, like the prophet Jonah did.

Distinguishing between *kairos* and *chronos* helps us to look for the additional meanings *to* time – to recognise God is at work doing a new thing. God is *continuing* to do new things and is calling new people to bring those things about. Will you and I follow the call of Jesus? That is the question. Amen.