

Mark 1:14-20

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen.¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

There’s no ‘I’ in Jesus

A quick review: We’re in the third week of our Lenten worship series called “Born Anew” which focuses on what characterizes the Christian life – it’s not simply that a Christian is baptized and goes to a church a certain number of Sundays per year; being a Christian is about following Jesus, and that means we live life in a new way. Jesus says, “Unless you are born anew you will not see the kingdom of God.” Jesus wants us to see the kingdom of God, which is not the same as heaven – when he tells the scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of heaven,” he doesn’t mean, “You’re about to die.” Jesus understood the kingdom to be a present and future reality; present in the form of the believer and the community of believers, but also future in the sense that God’s kingdom will reign supreme some day. Those who are “born anew” are those who belong to the kingdom in the here and now; it’s our new birth that enables us to see the kingdom of God in our midst.

So how are we “born anew”? Well I already mentioned *belief*; the kingdom of God consists of community of *believers*. What exactly do we believe? That’s what I addressed on Ash Wednesday; I explained to those who came for prayer and to receive ashes that “from dust you came and to dust you will return,” which means we need to come to grips with our sorry state of being in this world, a world of clashing egos and self-preservation, of vanity and hatred which cannot and will not endure. We have to *realize* that we are not who God intends us to be, but we *also realize* that God loves us to such a degree that he sends Jesus not simply to die for us but to *live* for us as well. Our belief is in the Resurrection and all that it entails, that Christ is alive, that in him we have the victory over sin and death, and it’s *that realization* that leads to jubilation. Every Sunday is a mini-Easter, a celebration of Christ’s resurrection and *our* victory as well as his victory over sin and death. That’s what moves us from tears of sorrow to tears of gladness.

But life has a way of distracting us, and we can lose our joy and our direction if we’re not vigilant, and so two Sundays ago I went on to discuss how we, as ambassadors of God, have to *prepare* ourselves to face a world where people oppose God’s kingdom in and seek to establish their *own* kingdom (and too often in the *name* of God). Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, and the reason he was able to resist was that the Spirit of God was with him; the whole season of Lent is a reflection of Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness, a time when he was tested. We have to spend concentrated time with God not just during Lent but throughout the year if we expect to remain steadfast in our faith.

Last week I spoke on *proclamation*; the first thing Jesus does when he comes out of the wilderness is to *proclaim* good news – freedom of the captives, restoration of sight to the blind, the year of the Lord’s favor. In other words you are proclaiming this new life in Christ of which you partake; *you* are released, *you* are healed, *you* have received this good news of God’s imminent kingdom, and it’s all too good to keep to yourself – and if you don’t feel it’s good enough to share you should go back to the wilderness and spend some more time realizing just how good this news really is, because you can’t *proclaim* God’s kingdom if you’re not enthusiastic about God’s kingdom. I would guess that many of you are here today because someone proclaimed it to you and invited you to enter into new life in Christ. Now more than ever, we the church need to get back into *proclamation mode*; we don’t have time for squabbling and padding our own egos; there’s a world in distress out there, and we have the answer it’s looking for; God’s kingdom has come and all are invited to belong to it.

Which brings us up to the present, and the topic of *cooperation*, and we should ask ourselves, “How cooperative is the Church?” These days things seem a lot better than they used to be; there used to be religious wars where Orthodox and Catholics and Protestants were killing each other, but there’s still way too much competition between denominations. I’ll be honest with you; there are a lot of churches out there that upset me, because I believe they have corrupted the good news that Jesus calls us to proclaim. There are churches out there that seem more concerned with decorum and dogma than they do with proclaiming the kingdom of God. Because the message that Jesus proclaims, and by extension the message that we his followers are called to proclaim, is a simple message. Jesus did not talk about Christology or transubstantiation or original sin or immaculate conception – those are our dilemmas. Those are the things that we have obsessed over; those are the things that have interfered with our calling to proclaim a simple message about God’s love and God’s reign.

That’s why I think today’s gospel lesson is instructive. Jesus has a goal: to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom to all people. And in order for Jesus to reach that goal, he knows that he’ll need helpers, disciples. And where does Jesus go to find his disciples? He did not go to the synagogues of Galilee and say to the educated rabbis “follow me.” He didn’t go to the high priests in Jerusalem and say, “Follow me.” He went to a bunch of fishermen. Later he solicited a tax collector, a zealot (perhaps a radical militant), and a few other folks, but none of them were intellectual giants or people in powerful positions. Perhaps he chose fishermen because their vocation was simple – much like his message – and these men understood teamwork. In 1986 a couple fishermen on the sea of Galilee discovered what has become known as the “Jesus Boat,” which dates to the first century and is roughly 27 feet long and would have had a crew of 6 or 7 men – in the 21st chapter of John it says that 7 disciples went out in one boat to go fishing. These men would have understood teamwork; some men needed to row when there was no wind, some steer, one who knew basic first aid in case anyone got hurt, and one to be captain. When you stopped to fish it took everyone to cast out the net and haul it back in, to sort the fish and to store them. There was nothing too intellectually complicated about rowing and steering and casting nets, but you would have had a hard time doing it alone, and everyone needed to work together to reach their goal, which was to catch fish. They wouldn’t have gotten too far in achieving that goal if one of the rowers started rowing backwards, or if only three out of seven agreed to pull in the nets full of fish. They *needed* each other to reach their goal. They needed to CO-OPERATE.

Likewise the Church (both capital C and small c) needs to co-operate if it hopes to achieve its goal. The capital C church works best when everyone sticks to the simple task of spreading God's love without competing with one another for numbers – when doctors and nurses help the sick, and when damaged houses are fixed, when lonely people are visited, when those who are oppressed are set free, and when the good news of God's love and redemption is proclaimed without adding all the caveats.

And the church with a small c, like our church? We do best when we understand ourselves as a team: One of our most important ministries is our Sunday School ministry; not big, but growing, and everyone is encouraged by it because we understand that the youth are our future. But the Sunday School wouldn't survive if parents were not motivated to come to church, and that wouldn't happen if there wasn't a young adult ministry that helped create bonds of friendship between the moms and dads, and that ministry wouldn't exist if there weren't other groups in the church, like festival committees and volunteers who organize fundraisers to raise funds to support ministries directly or indirectly, and the festival committee wouldn't function if there weren't men's ministries or women's ministries and prayer ministries that support men and women young and old in prayer and encouragement, and those ministries wouldn't thrive without the support of folks who make sure that the lights are working and the toilets are flushing and the coffee was brewing so that we can all be wide awake on Sunday morning. And none of this would happen if our worship was flat, boring, and uninspiring where people are asking themselves, "What am I doing here?" Hence we have a worship team that tries to make worship a great experience! We may be involved in only one or two of these ministries, but we have to recognize how they work together...how they CO-OPERATE in order for the church to achieve its greater goal as expressed in the mission / vision / values statement that I have you repeating every week:

Leader: O Church of God, united, we have a mission:

All: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world!

Leader: O people of God, we have a vision:

All: To ignite and sustain a passionate spiritual relationship with Christ among all people!

Leader: O brothers and sisters, we have one great value at the core of our being:

All: To love! We shall love our God with all that we have and love our neighbors as ourselves.

We could easily quibble over this statement, but none of us can argue that such a mission / vision / value is incongruent with the good news that Jesus calls us to proclaim: it speaks of building a relationship with Christ which inspires us to ministry. It speaks of God's kingdom come by mentioning world transformation through love of God and love of neighbor and love of self. We can all get behind this goal and see how all our separate ministries work together to make this happen.