

Follow Him

Mark 1:14-20

Jesus begins his public ministry proclaiming that "the time is fulfilled." And yet the gospel story was just beginning. Mark begins like an alarm clock, persistently declaring the time and demanding some response. Mark said: it was the time when the prophets' words were fulfilled (vv. 2-3); the time of the new Elijah (vv. 4-8); the time when the heavens were torn open, the Spirit descended, and a voice sounded from heaven (vv. 9-11); and the time when both the Spirit and the Adversary were at work in the world with new intensity (vv. 12-13). Then we are propelled into a time when John had already been arrested—the time of Elijah's preparation passed before they even knew what it meant!—and finally the one around whom all this activity had been swirling spoke: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (v. 15). Jesus did not just announce the time. He fulfilled it, in word and in flesh.

In our scripture, we have a case of instant decisions for Christ: Simon, Andrew, James, and John drop everything and become disciples, just like that, "immediately." But, this is not the end of the story. This is just the beginning of "the beginning" (v. 1). Ahead, for them and for us, there is much to learn, much stumbling, misunderstanding, and backsliding. Becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.

In Mark's Gospel we see how this early decision needed to be reaffirmed and even corrected time and again. At Caesarea Philippi, Simon affirmed his faith in Jesus, but not his faith in Jesus as the suffering Messiah—that would take a lifetime (8:27-33). On the mount of transfiguration Peter knew how

good it was to be with Jesus but forgot that the real task was to follow Jesus—for a lifetime (9:2-8). In the courtyard, warming himself before the fire, Peter threatened to give up a lifetime of fidelity for a moment of fear (14:66-72). At the very end, when Jesus was on the cross, Peter, Andrew, and James were nowhere to be found. Even then God did not count that moment as the final word: no, Jesus would go before them—for a lifetime (15:40-41; 16:7-8).

In our following of Jesus, our decision is to be lived out in fidelity, service, even sacrifice. Sometimes we in the church are so good at nurturing that we forget that even "cradle Christians" sometimes need to decide for fidelity, service, even sacrifice. Christianity is always both for now and for the long haul; both a moment and a lifetime.

Mark's brief account of the beginnings of Jesus' Galilean ministry links Jesus' proclamation of the gospel with his calling of a band of disciples. His imperative to them and was to repent and believe, turning away from prior trusts and loyalties, a response to the indicative claim that the kingdom is at hand, that God is graciously at work.

The story of the calling of the disciples follows Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom and demonstrates what this kingdom involves. Right away Jesus not only talks about the reign of God but enacts it. The ultimate religious authority that he would exercise over winds, waves, and demons is immediately evident in his calling of the disciples. Jesus calls the disciples compellingly. The disciples were drawn only by his summons, they follow Jesus before he has performed any spectacular miracles that could serve as validating credentials. They were elected to discipleship simply through the fact that Jesus claimed them. When Jesus declared that now they shall be fishers of people, their new status was anchored in the fact that Jesus had

fished for them; Jesus was and is the ultimate fisher, and they and we are the netted fish. In the obedient responses of the two sets of brothers the reign of God is actualized in the present.

James and John "immediately" left Zebedee, which probably pained him. But did they dishonor their father? I would like to think not. I would like to think that this parent taught his children to strike out onto the unpredictable seas—and so he could not fault them for going their own way.

In northern Minnesota, the opening day of fishing season is practically a holy day! Sermons on fishing texts, therefore, are well received. The problem is that kind of fishing—using lures or live bait—is predicated on trickery. But the biblical casting of nets is different—totally encompassing, without deception. Yes, evangelism aims to take human fish where they did not plan to go, but we should seek to convert without resorting to "bait and switch." Fishing involves more than the act of casting nets and pulling in the haul. There are also the preparations, the mending of nets, repairing the tools that are bound to be damaged and worn in the rough-and-tumble between the hunter and the hunted and the ever-changing environment in which the drama is played out. We can't always be fishing, even if that's your favorite part. This passage began with an ominous note: John was arrested. Mark's audience needed no further elaboration—they knew the story, they knew the risks involved with giving yourself over to a new vision that challenges the status quo. To repent, to begin a new life, to be led by the Spirit, takes not just faith but also courage. **Elton W. Brown**

Jesus and the four disciples were active agents in leading people to experience the presence of the kingdom of God. The disciples, nor are we passive recipients of God's favor. Jesus called them in order that they might join him in proclaiming the coming of God's reign on earth. Like Jesus, the

disciples experience opposition that will eventually claim their lives (see [13:3-13](#)). But the end of Mark's Gospel shows that death's victory over Jesus—and therefore over the disciples—is only temporary. God raised Jesus from the dead and God will raise the disciples and us as well. In Mark the risen Jesus chose to meet his disciples in Galilee ([16:7](#)), the place where his ministry began. This connects Jesus' ministry on earth and the hope for the complete and final revelation of the kingdom of God.

This scripture calls us to examine our response to the proclamation of the gospel. Has our response been as immediate and complete as that of the four disciples? What is it that keeps us today from responding to God's invitation as the disciples did? **Leslie J. Hoppe**

Jesus calls people to respond. Because the time is fulfilled, Jesus calls us to "repent, and believe in the good news" ([v. 15](#)). And because the kingdom of God has drawn near, Jesus calls disciples to follow him and be made into fishers for people ([v. 17](#)). **Lee Barrett**

Simon, Andrew, James, and John; like those disciples who misunderstood and failed Jesus at every turn, we too are sinners in need of forgiveness for our multiple betrayals. Like them, we sinners, despite our failings, are slowly being transmuted into followers of Christ. Like them we are called not to the enjoyment of a private salvation but to a public vocation. Like them, we are summoned by God to leave our parents' house, abandoning self-interest, security, and social admiration. Just as it did for the disciples, the command "Follow me" points to the way of the cross for us. The ominous reference to the arrest of John the Baptist warns that we too are called to a life of risk, insecurity, and self-abnegation. **Lee Barrett**

Jesus does not just ask us to add one more task to our busy lives. He calls us into new ways of being. When Simon and Andrew leave their nets, they

leave a way of life. This is even clearer with James and John, who leave not only their nets but also their father. These disciples left behind their work, family, and place—all the stuff of a new identity. If we can take Jesus at his word—that if the disciples follow him, he will make them fishers—then the story of the disciples shows what fishers' lives look like. They find themselves astounded at Jesus' teaching. They witness the rebuking of unclean spirits, the healing of sick people, and the cleansing of lepers. They lose track of Jesus and must search for him again. They know that their lives unfold in the shadow of the arrest and execution of John. And this is only chapter 1. **Ted A. Smith**

I know few people who have left everything to follow Jesus. However I saw my friend Michele Fairfax do that very thing. She left job, house, husband and children to follow Jesus. A few years later I was asked by the Spirit to follow Jesus in a similar way by going to seminary and changing my priorities. Do we dare follow the example of my friend and the first disciples?

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