

The Start of Something Big

Mark 1:14-20

Have you ever been a part of something big? It does not have to be big as defined by others – but something big you. For a 5 or 6 year old, big might be going to school a full-day and discovering there is a world of knowledge, and you are going to be given the keys of reading and math to open that wisdom and life-long learning. Maybe your big thing has to do with the kind of work you choose – your portion of the work makes the wheels of industry or education or human services or art to turn, and hopefully gave you satisfaction or at least gave you the financial resources to care for your family. Maybe your big thing was marriage and family. At Christmas one of my friends sent me a picture of her tribe. What started as her and her husband has expanded to 3 children, their 3 spouses and 8 grandchildren! Maybe your big thing is like my son George's. He has decided to throw his hat in the ring for the 8th District seat in the Michigan state legislature – to make it he will have to partner with hundreds of people just to get elected, and if he is successful his real responsibilities will begin of representing the people of his district and giving voice to their needs and concerns. For us in the church, we are also part of something big! Our beginning goes back to the start of Jesus' public ministry. He gave us an example and model of the start of something big!

Jesus returned to Galilee following his forty days in the wilderness (1:12-13), ready to begin his mission to proclaim the "good news." He announced that the moment has finally come for God to retake control over the world that God has created. Because the time (*kairos*) was right, Jesus' ministry could begin.

Jesus used a metaphor that appears sixty-six times in the New Testament, "the kingdom of God," to announce the beginning of his ministry. One reason Jesus used this metaphor was because he sought to contrast the goals of his mission with the goals of the Herodian dynasty. Herod the Great ruled as king because he was placed on the throne by the Roman Senate as a reward for his support during the Parthian invasion of Roman Palestine. Herod was anxious to show both his Roman patrons and his Jewish subjects that he was worthy of the title king. He rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem because temple building was a royal prerogative. Herod constructed an impressive building over the tombs of the patriarchs and their wives in Hebron to show his subjects that he honored Jewish tradition. Herod built the cities of Caesarea Maritima and Sebaste to impress and honor Augustus Caesar, his imperial patron. Herod's son Antipas rebuilt the city of Sepphoris, which was just three miles from Nazareth, the village where Jesus grew up. This beautiful city, described as the "ornament of Galilee," served as Antipas' capital until he built Tiberias along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee to honor Tiberius Caesar. The New Testament does not even record that Jesus ever entered these cities, which stood as testaments to the royal power and prestige of the Herodian dynasty.

The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed was not bolstered by the construction of monumental buildings and great cities. God's kingdom is manifest in the human embrace of God's rule through repentance and faith. Jesus' mission was to call people to repentance, that is, a total reorientation of their lives so that they will be in a position to accept God's sovereign rule authentically. **Leslie J. Hoppe**

Jesus' proclamation is not just a solo recitation of informative words but is an efficacious action that creates community and is taken up and continued by that community. Consequently, these few verses have had wide-ranging implications

for our understanding of the church and its proclamation, the Christian life, and even the person and work of Christ.

Jesus' message, the "good news," is a declaration of God's victory, an announcement of a wondrously new state of affairs breaking into the present: God's liberation, restoration, and reconciliation as demonstrated through Jesus' healing miracles, his casting out of demons, and his teaching. Jesus said repent and believe in the good news. The imperative to repent and believe, turning away from prior trusts and loyalties, is a response to the indicative claim that the kingdom is at hand, that God is graciously at work.

Right away Jesus not only talked about the reign of God but enacted it. Jesus called the disciples, formed a community, and began living and modeling that community. But like those disciples – being at the start of something big doesn't mean we don't make mistakes and have our set-backs.

According to Calvin, God called "rough mechanics" like Simon, Andrew, James, and John in order to show that none of us are called by virtue of his or her own talents or excellences. 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, and like Abraham, we are summoned by God to leave our parents' house, abandoning self-interest, security, and social approbation. Like them, we can find our inadequate attempts at ministry transformed by grace into extensions of Jesus' proclamatory activity. Just as it did for the disciples, the command "Follow me" points to the way of the cross for us. Just as it did for the disciples, 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' mission was not a solitary one. The church remembers that there were some people who were associated with Jesus from the very beginning. Jesus called four men—two sets of brothers—to follow him. Later he would commission them and eight others to preach and to drive out demons (3:13-19). Peter and Andrew, James and John provide the reader with a striking example of what a response of repentance and faith means. Their response to Jesus' invitation was immediate and complete.

You may wonder whether you could have been one of the disciples and answered immediately and completely. Be comforted, the name of Andrew stands out from those of the other four disciples. It is a Greek name with no Hebrew equivalent. While the New Testament shows little interest in Andrew, his Greek name was a harbinger of the extent of Jesus' mission as carried on by the disciples. They carried Jesus' proclamation of the good news beyond the Jewish community to the Gentile world. Unexciting Andrew had an important part to play!

Jesus and the four disciples were active agents in leading people to experience the presence of the kingdom of God. The disciples were not 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.

Don't assume that because Jesus was starting something big and right and noble that everything went smoothly. The Gospel of Mark also recounts the resistance that Jesus experienced to his mission. This resistance eventually led to his death. Like Jesus, the disciples experienced 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—was only temporary. God raised Jesus from the dead and God will raise the disciples as well. It is significant that in Mark the risen Jesus chose to meet his disciples in Galilee (16:7), the place where his

ministry began. This underscores the connection between Jesus' ministry on earth and the hope for the complete and final revelation of the kingdom of God.

The mission of Jesus began at the right time (*kairos*), that is, when God signaled the divine intention finally and definitively to take control of this world from the powers of evil. The rest of Mark's Gospel offers a testimony to the in-breaking of the kingdom of God through Jesus' powerful words and mighty deeds. This testimony serves to support the faith of those who await the full and final revelation of the kingdom upon Jesus' return (13:24-27). **Leslie J. Hoppe**

Our prayer: Help us to get excited about the fact that Jesus started something big and we are part of his movement. We each have a part in this ministry – an important part – because we are all in this together.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.