

Called to Transformation

How Jesus calls us to act now to do something audacious,
in spite of ourselves, precisely because GOD is audacious

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs
Text: *Mark 1:14-20*

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Calling

I love these call stories: these stories of Jesus calling the disciples to follow him. I think they're pure gold for us. They may not be deeply profound like the parables or iconic like the birth story. And next to the Baptism of Jesus a couple of weeks ago, these stories of Jesus finding disciples just don't have the same juice. **But** if we listen to them, to what part they play in the wider story, we might get a better sense of what they are actually communicating.

Last week, we had Philip and Nathaneal--Philip leaves the discipleship of John the Baptizer to follow Jesus--which has to be an awkward conversation. *So, John, I've got some bad news...*

Jesus gives his attention to Nathaneal: *I saw you under the fig tree*, he tells him.

Now we get a call story from the evangelist we call Mark. It's quite a different story. Andrew and Simon are first, but now it is James and John, sons of Zebedee that come second. And this evangelist has a different interest, I think.

Let's back up to the beginning. Before Jesus goes about collecting disciples. Before Jesus even bursts on the scene, there is John, a prophet, proclaiming the Good News through repentance and baptism. Jesus is baptized by John after repenting: a reversal of sorts. A pattern at deep odds with the way we talk about Jesus as being without sin. As being the one to baptize the people. **He** receives the transforming power of baptism.

The baptism story is supposed to provoke us, I think. Particularly in the way Mark presents baptism as renewal and new life *after repentance*. To Mark's understanding, baptism isn't so much membership but turning a new course, changing *for a really good reason*.

So what happens next in this evangelist's story is that John is arrested and Jesus takes up John's call to repentance.

Called to what exactly?

When I hear Jesus say

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

I get kind of nervous. Maybe you don't, but I do. Repent is not really a feel-good word. And this statement is pregnant with meaning.

1. *The time is fulfilled* - Now. We're talking now. The plan, everything has already started. We aren't talking tomorrow or next week. This isn't goal-setting for next year or a five-year implementation plan. The boat has arrived.
2. *and the kingdom of God has come near* - this is the boat, or the window. This is the ball game. Here is where we act and for what.
3. *repent* - Woah! What? I thought I had more time before I had to deal with myself, with what I've done. Don't I get to work on it some more? I have to give this stuff up first?
4. *and believe in the good news.* - Isn't that what I already am doing? Aren't I already believing? Does this mean I'm not?

So, if the time is now, we're staring at our window to act, and what I need to do is repent - give up my ways and turn to new ways - and then I can believe this good news.

This is Jesus's introductory message.

I hate to break it to us, but this is what John said and what Jesus began saying, taking the torch passed to him by John. This is what Jesus is calling the disciples to. Can we hear this? Can we hear this message of repentance and belief? Even now? Not once, a long time ago and then perpetual belief, but belief coming *from* repeated repentance? From contrition and change - from moving into new patterns and becoming new people. Again and again.

Being Called

This message undergirds the call stories, as Jesus is describing something that is

1. urgent,
2. imminent,
3. requires sacrifice, and
4. expects belief/trust.

Jesus calls these followers to a mission that is current, unfolding, that is going on *right now* and that they can help. They have a huge part to play. Are they ready? Are they willing?

What do *you* think?

Jesus sees some dudes fishing. These aren't budding rabbinic scholars. They aren't the straight A students in class, graduating and looking for a rabbi to follow. They actually didn't go to school. We know this *because* they're fishing. This is their work.

And Jesus sees these two guys and says to them essentially, *I've got some new water for you to fish in; different game.* And they go. Then he finds two more and pitches the same thing. And notice their response: they drop their nets, leave their dad in the lurch, and go.

We don't read about tear-streaked faces with dialogue

Bye, Dad!

Goodbye, Son!

The poor man is fishing for his livelihood and his three-person crew is reduced to one and he's left without sons because they're already gone. Take that in.

That's urgency. We might hear this as bad news, but this is the level of urgency Jesus is talking about.

Jesus speaks to this elsewhere, too, about sometimes needing to leave our family behind for the sake of Jesus. That we're doing something bigger and more important. That the only way we can treat the first commandment seriously is to act, when confronted, as if it is first. That GOD comes first, even in front of family.

But this is more than the urgency, it is the moment, it is the act of repentance and transformation, and then it is belief and trust. It's jumping out of the boat when Jesus comes calling, leaving the nets and Dad behind.

The Ball Game

Few stories are so ready-made for us to see the way forward as this one.

If we take seriously that Jesus calls us out of our mundane lives and into new life, we have to understand these four things that Jesus presents.

1. That Jesus is always talking about now. Always. His focus is fixing stuff here and now. He rarely talks about planning for the future and going slow and patiently building something. He talks about now. Right now.
2. Jesus is always talking about the nearness of the Kingdom. He is saying that the urgency for our mission is because it is just *right there*. We are so close. We can almost touch it. And *that's* our job. Our dream job. Close enough to hold. Grab it!
3. Jesus calls us to repent and change our ways. Not just once. Over and over. After people are baptized, he keeps it up. And these people who follow him? He keeps telling them to get with the program. *Peter, you sound like Satan. Get outta my way.*
4. Jesus keeps telling them *Trust me, believe in me, because this is happening. Don't be afraid.* This is hard work, but it is good work. It is life and death work. It is honest work and it is Kingdom work.

This is our message. And we need to hear it. St. Stephen's needs to hear this sense of urgency, imminence, sacrifice, and belief. Because now is our time. The kingdom *is* close. We are being called to repent and to trust.

2015 is a big year for us. Not only because of past blessing, but also because of present action. It is because we are given this opportunity, this chance to change things, to build something together that is truly amazing. And it won't be easy. It'll take some hard looks in the mirror. For all of us. But when we do, we can believe. That's the ball game. That's why we play. Why we work. Why we gather each week. And what GOD is searching for.