

Nobodies

Jesus calls these particular nobodies to give up everything

A sermon by The Rev. Drew Downs
Epiphany 3B | Mark 1:14-20
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Most stories have great opening lines.

“If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book.”

“Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can’t be sure.”

“All this happened, more or less.”

or, seriously, this one:

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into an enormous insect.”

Great stories open and reveal before we know what we’re taking in.

Popular musicians put the best song first.

Those of us of a certain age remember playing one CD over and over that winter after the Christmas of 1991. That big, ballistic ode to youth and dysfunction, Nirvana’s *Nevermind* opened with a song no one could escape at that moment: “Smells Like Teen Spirit”. One of the greatest openings to an album in rock history.

Star Wars had the kind of opening. The John Williams score forcefully opens: it resounds and overwhelms. Inescapable and emotive. And just as your heart begins to pound, the words stream across the screen, telling you the backstory, situating you in a time. Quick, read them, make sense of them, they’re disappearing before they reach the top of the screen...

The scope and scale of the world are beyond measure.

And then somehow, we’re plopped down on a desert planet with a teenage boy hoping to escape this nothingness. So odd to stare at the slowness and nothingness of Tatooine after being thrown into a galaxy far, far away.

This is the same style the evangelist we know as Mark uses to open his masterwork. The size and scope of that declaration: this is the Good News, a quote from Isaiah, then introducing John the Baptizer.

How little, but how much

Jesus going into the water and coming back up, the Spirit descending, the Voice. The Baptism of Jesus. Here we are:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And when the voice is done speaking

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

We note how little is written and yet how much is said. This will be true as we keep making our way through Mark.

This is why I warn us not to add too much to Mark’s telling. Don’t mistake what’s there and what isn’t. What’s there is important.

It’s important to know that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness; that “he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

We don’t need to know what that temptation looked like. We don’t need to scramble to Luke or Matthew to fill in the gaps. When reading Mark, we don’t need to know. How Jesus was tempted isn’t the point. Not for Mark. Nor for what he has to tell us about *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Finally, he speaks

But this is where the storyteller drops us in after 13 short verses and world shaking power, we find Jesus leaving the wilderness and coming to the backwoods, the flat midwest cornfields or the Appalachian mountain town, or the Nevada desolate territories—this Galilee may as well be Tatooine.

And he walks in proclaiming. But go back to that opening line again and notice what it says:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the

kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

We are reading what Mark calls *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. But what is Jesus proclaiming? "the good news of God."

Pastor and writer Russell Rathbun says that he just assumes the Good News is about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's what we always talk about. But...

Jesus comes to Galilee proclaiming the good news. If he is proclaiming the good news, it is obviously not his death and resurrection. It seems like it must be something that is available or accessible at that point in the narrative.

What Jesus is preaching is Good News. And what is that exactly that he is preaching?

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

A kin-dom now, not in the future, not in the clouds or a galaxy far, far away. Fulfilled in this moment and coming ever closer.

This is the context for when this man from Nazareth meets four men while they're fishing and offers all of them a new job.

Nobodies, Nowhere

This is why I remind us not to add more than is written here. Because Jesus approaches these total strangers and invites them to fish for people. And their response is direct, simple, and incredible. They drop their nets and follow him.

They now have nothing. And leave everything. Two of them abandon their father in the boat, leaving the family business.

We don't dwell enough on this moment. Of Jesus in a nowhere place speaking to nobodies walking away from all they have; walking away from all they would have; estranged from their families, children: the life they know.

We should dwell on this. And grieve. And imagine. Put ourselves in those boats holding those nets. Dwell on how they leave behind everything and go. Feel that.

And how abandoning your job and leaving your father in the lurch would be a family-destroying thing. How the pain of broken relationships and unattended lives would follow such division and sudden departure. Some of us know this pain and how we feel about

those who did it. How the father of James and John must feel.

We shouldn't delude ourselves by reading between the lines and adding some primary subject matter that isn't disclosed—the touching goodbyes and the understandings—the pastoral conciliation and the words of affirmation. The text guides us in the opposite direction. They left.

And that's the point.

Following Jesus is hard

The storyteller shows us in this nowhere place why following Jesus is hard. It means leaving things behind. It means embracing a faith that is bigger than dating Jesus or taking him into your heart or doing nice things for people or going to church every Sunday.

When these four left, they didn't just leave a life and a family, but also a future. A future which would now never be. To embrace a different one. A new one. The future Jesus is offering them.

Some argue that if Simon, Andrew, James, and John were builders, Jesus would call them to be builders of people. But that's not what he did. He came here to these nobodies in this nowhere and said to them something not that far from, *come with me, we've got a kingdom to create, one person at a time. Because I need you to be you.*

But to do that, we can't stay here. In the comfort. The stability of family. Or even in the wealth of the city. A movement is going to have to move.

It's a call out of nowhere to go to the biggest somewhere they know. And in the end the man in white tells Mary to get the others and go back to Galilee to find Jesus.

This is a big story. It's bigger than us. It's bigger than our families and our church, bigger than the Episcopal Church and the Prayer Book. Bigger than the scripture and thousands of years of tradition. It's the Good News of God revealed in the Messiah.

And it is only just beginning. And whether you believe it or not, the kin-dom is nearer than ever. With us. Fishing.

For me, that's growing up to be my Grandpa, Francis. Heading out through the open water to the right spot. Then quiet. In a boat for hours. Patiently waiting. Ready. Ready for when it comes.

Like my Dad. Finding his spots. Waiting. Ready. People always need help finding the way. Even when it's right

in front of them. Right there. We just need to see it. And
get ready. To go.