

January 21, 2024
Mark 1:14-20

Epiphany 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“A Change in Direction”

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

In all my years of schooling from elementary school through university, most of my classmates were my own age. Some who were born in the fall were a few months older than me, while others with summer birthdays were a bit younger, but we shared a common experience with our dates of birth and the era in which we were raised. So when I entered seminary, I assumed that my new classmates would also be about the same age as me; but I soon discovered that not everyone had the same life experience as me. My first clue that we were a far more diverse class than I had previously experienced came when I met a classmate named Rich, who at first appeared to be about my age. But then Rich introduced me to his wife and teenage daughter; while I think I kept my composure, inside I was surprised and confused that someone who would be studying for ordained ministry with me would have a wife and child. As I was introduced to other classmates, I discovered that Rich was not the only one who had far more years and experiences than me: one of my classmates was a former business executive with a wife and two children; another had been a teacher in a local school district; one of our classmates was a surgical nurse in a prominent hospital; and yet another classmate had been an attorney in a prominent Philadelphia law firm. It turned out that I was one of the youngest members of my seminary class and one of the few who went directly from university to seminary; most of my class had been in other careers and professions before they answered the call to study for ordained ministry in the Lutheran Church, leaving behind long and prosperous careers to come serve our Lord as pastors. While everyone who enters seminary makes sacrifices for the sake of their callings, what these classmates had left behind was far greater than anything in my experience.

While there are still seminarians who, like me, went directly from university graduation to seminary, many more persons who answer the call to ordained ministry are “second-career students,” persons who left other careers for the pastorate. In some ways, this is a recent phenomenon; in the past, most Lutheran seminarians came directly from university to begin their seminary studies. But increasingly, the call to ordained ministry comes to persons later in life, resulting in pastors who bring diverse backgrounds and life experiences that enrich their ministries and the

congregations they are called to serve. Answer the call to become a “second career” student can involve great sacrifice, but many of my colleagues in these circumstances believed that whatever they left behind does not compare to the blessings they have received in serving as pastors of the church of Jesus Christ.

In these Sundays of the Epiphany season, we have been hearing stories of how Jesus called persons to become his followers. The invitation to discipleship is one of Jesus’ first acts in his ministry; in the Synoptic Gospels, the calling of disciples follows his temptation in the wilderness, while in the Gospel of John it follows John the Baptist’s identifying him as “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). The persons who Jesus invites to be his followers will one day be sent forth to “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19); those who were invited to follow Jesus will in turn invite others into the fellowship that is the Church of Jesus Christ. Today’s Gospel lesson begins with Jesus’ first words in the Gospel of Mark: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*” (Mark 1:15). Once Jesus has been introduced by the Evangelist as the unique Son of God, the one who will embody the Holy Spirit and even reverse the story of sinful humanity, his ministry can begin. Mark reports that it is John’s arrest that triggers the ministry of Jesus: “*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God*” (1:14). The word “arrest” (*paradidomai*) will be used later in Mark to describe the “handing over” of Jesus to the authorities:

- “The Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” – 9:31.
- “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit on him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” – 10:33-34.
- “He came a third time and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.’” – 14:41.

The end of the Baptist’s ministry in Mark reminds readers of the fate that awaits Jesus; “*Jesus’ death will be the source of salvation for humanity.*” (PHEME PERKINS).

Mark reports that the first words of Jesus when he arrives in Galilee to proclaim the “*good news of God*” combines John’s preaching of repentance with a call to “*believe in the good news*” (1:15). Jesus’ opening words – “*the time is fulfilled*” – indicate

that Jesus' ministry will bring about the age of salvation as "*the kingdom of God has come near.*" The coming of Jesus fulfills God's plan for the grand sweep of history. Mark links the time of John's arrest with the time when Jesus starts preaching the gospel. A different era begins: the time of prophecy is over; the time of Jesus and fulfillment has come. Jesus proclaims that the "Kingdom of God" is about to appear; for Jesus, the kingdom's arrival lay in the immediate future:

- "Those who are confronted by the power of God in the words and works of Jesus experience the kingdom as present, yet hidden; its full manifestation still lies in a future that has drawn near." – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

Jesus' declaration that the time of God's fulfillment of God's promises in the coming of the Kingdom is followed by a summons, an imperative that follows the indicative: "*Repent, and believe in the good news.*" "Repent" literally means "turn around," a call to shift the direction of one's life, "*to look, listen, and give their full attention to the kingdom that is arriving*" (Williamson). The call to "*repent and believe in the good news*" would be at the heart of early Christian preaching from those who had accepting this summons to repentance and belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ:

- "When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'" – Acts 11:18.
- "I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus." – Acts 20:20-21.
- "Therefore let us go on towards perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith towards God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection from the dead, and eternal judgment." – Hebrews 6:1-2.

The call to such a change in direction, to repentance and belief in the good news of Jesus Christ, will begin to be at the heart of Jesus' ministry as Mark reports that "*as Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen*" (1:16). The brothers may have been from Capernaum, a city on the shores of the sea that will figure prominently in the Gospels. We are told little about their background or circumstances, but they may have been prosperous fishermen whose occupations make them and their families quite prosperous. We also have no idea whether Jesus had ever met them or if they had heard anything about him before he extends to them an invitation to "*follow me,*

and I will make you fish for people” (1:17). The story of Jesus’ invitation to discipleship is like the call of Elisha by the prophet Elijah as the former is plowing his fields:

- “So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, ‘Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.’ Then Elijah said to him, ‘Go back again; for what have I done to you?’ He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.” – 1 Kings 19:19-21.

Unlike Elijah’s call to Elisha, there is no report in Mark of any verbal response to Jesus’ invitation, nor do the brothers show any hesitation in their response: “*And immediately they left their nets and followed him*” (1:18), which demonstrates that their call comes from God. To the ancient reader, the summons to follow Jesus – i.e. to become a disciple – would be seen as an extraordinary disruption in one’s life (“*Peter said to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’*” – 10:28); such a summons might even have seemed offensive. If the labour of the sons was critical to the fishing enterprise in which their family was engaged, then such a sudden departure might appear to put the welfare of the whole family at risk.

The summons of Jesus to which Simon and Andrew respond without hesitation is an invitation to “fish for people.” This is a reference to the later missionary activity of the disciples; Mark will later report that Jesus will give his disciples a share in his own mission (“*And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons*” – 3:14-15). For those who first heard these words, Jesus’ references to hooks and nets may have called to mind references in the Old Testament that generally carried with them a negative overtone, one of ensnaring persons against their will (“*The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: the time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks*” – Amos 4:2). Those who will be “caught” in the disciples’ gospel ministry, however, will be saved, not destroyed:

- “The metaphor of fishing for people is used in a context that suggests the positive function to be performed by preaching, bringing the good news to others ... This story reminds us that discipleship always has a cost. We must

be willing to give up something in order to bring the good news to others.” – Perkins.

Jesus’ calling persons to discipleship continues when *“as he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.”* The inclusion of the reference of the father of James and John emphasizes how important family relations were to the people of that time; instead of being identified by family names, one’s identity was tied into the identity of one’s parents (as is true of many modern cultures, such as Russia and Denmark). As in his calling to the first set of fishermen brothers, Mark reports that *“immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him”* (1:20). Again, the call of Jesus to discipleship is so powerful that it supersedes one’s familial bonds and obligations; *“[Jesus’] authoritative presence is manifested in his word, and his effective reign appears in the response of the four.”* (Williamson).

Jesus will continue to call other persons to follow him as disciples until he gathers twelve followers who will be sent out as apostles to *“be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). For each of them, accepting the invitation to discipleship involved a radical change of direction in their lives. Like the four fishermen brothers, it meant leaving behind their families and occupations that had been their central means of identification. For others, it meant turning their backs on lucrative occupations and the security of their homes and communities. Accepting the call to become a disciple of Christ meant turning aside from their former means of identity to follow the one whose message would be rejected by many, who would be arrested and put to death on the cross, and whose message of good news would be received as bad news by many who were not willing to “repent,” to turn aside from their former ways in order to follow the one who calls his followers to a new way of life, to priorities radically different from the priorities of many in the world. As John would report in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus *“came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”* (John 1:11-13).

- “Jesus’ ‘follow me’ confronts us all with a decision that lies deeper than the question of earning a living. His call to discipleship focuses on the question of life’s ultimate loyalty, a question more basic than that of vocational choice. It speaks to Christians whose lives are humdrum, whose discipleship has degenerated into a preoccupation with things like nets and boats and hired servants.” – Williamson.

As I got to know my classmates and other members of the seminary community, I discovered that each person's story of how they arrived on the Mt. Airy campus involved decisions that resulted in a change of direction from the path they had assumed their lives would take. My roommate had also gone directly from university to seminary, but he had majored in economics at Cornell and had been planning on a career in business before the call of God changed the direction of his life. Others had planned on careers in education, medicine, or joining their family business; often, their decision to pursue studying for ordained ministry was not well-received by their families and friends. While my call to ordained ministry had come early in my life, and I had not needed to make anywhere near the sacrifices of many of my classmates, my experience as a pastor has meant that I have missed many family gatherings, been called to serve congregations far away from friends and loved ones, and required long and uncertain hours that has often meant sacrificing what I might have wanted to do for what I needed to do to fulfill my call as a pastor. This necessary "change in direction" is true not only of those who are called to serve in public ministries, but for all who are baptized as children of God and members of the church which is the body of Christ. The baptismal service challenges us to repent of any former allegiances, to renounces all that would draw us away from God so that we might "*worship the Lord your God, and serve only him*" (Deuteronomy 6:13). When we confess our faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the words of the Creeds, we are turning away from faith in anyone or anything else, putting out trust and faith in God and God alone. When we depart from worship, we hear the call to "*love and serve the Lord,*" which means the direction in which we live our daily lives will be turned toward loving others in the name of Jesus Christ and not in ways that serve our own desires or the expectations of others. Our callings and the sacrifices they entail will be different, but as baptized people of God all of us are called to a ministry that will change the direction of our lives and the lives of all who endeavor to follow Jesus in the path that leads to the abundant life God desires for all people.

- "All followers of Jesus are called to ministry. That's the whole concept of the Christian church: we are the body of Christ. Each one of us is a member with special gifts to share. Jesus' mission on earth was to call a community together and empower them for ministry in the world ... [Ministry] is a vocation each of us claims by virtue of our baptism in the body of Christ." – Henri Nouwen.

Over the years, I have learned that each person has a unique story of how they were called to serve God, both as ordained pastors and in their chosen occupations. Each of us may have stories of how our lives changed from the path we had assumed they would take; but for those who accept Jesus' invitation to "follow me," the changes

and sacrifices such a call entails pales in comparison to the joy that is ours in loving and serving as God's beloved children, born anew to a living hope.

Amen.