

Mark 1:14-20
January 22, 2012

South Plains

The Urgency of Life

“The time is fulfilled.” These are the first words out of Jesus’ mouth in the gospel according to Mark. The time of John the Baptist is over with his message “Prepare the way of the Lord.” The time of Jesus has arrived. His message is similar to John’s, “The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The preparation has been announced; now the real thing is here. Jesus comes with new urgency.

When that cruise ship ran aground off the coast of Italy, the Italian Coast Guard commander reached the captain of the crippled ship by radio with a simple message: “Get back on board!” To make sure the captain understood the urgency of those words, he added an Italian curse that I won’t try to translate into English. “Get back on board!” (Social media in Italy has picked up that cry and thrown it at the government to fix the economy.)

That’s the essence of Jesus’ preaching: “Get on board. God’s kingdom is arriving. Repent, turn around. You will want to be on board this kingdom.”

“Repent and believe in the good news,” has been the message of the church for 2000 years, so long have we heard that message that we may overlook its sense of

urgency. Mark’s gospel tries to keep the gospel fresh for readers by using the word “immediately” over and over in his story. In chapter one, “The Spirit immediately drove” Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Simon and Andrew “immediately left their nets and followed him.” When Jesus sees James and John, “immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.”

How often do we hear an invitation to follow Jesus, in some specific service, and we say, “Yeah, some time I mean to volunteer with Habitat, or teach a class, or go on a mission trip, or invite my neighbor to church. Some time, but not right now.” We’ve lost the sense that now is the time.

The Bible has a couple of different words for time. The word *chronos*, from which we get ‘chronology,’ refers to time measured by the clock or calendar. April 29 is a Sunday on the calendar. The other word in scripture is *kairos*, referring to time measured by a significant event. April 29 is not just any day. It’s a significant Sunday for me because it’s my last sermon at South Plains, a *kairos* time for me personally. I’ve got to get ready.

Jesus’ message is clear. “The time is fulfilled.” The moment has come. God is moving in the history of current events, presenting us not with the option of getting on board the kingdom if we like, but with the necessity, the mandate to repent and believe in the good news.

Repentance is a two-step dance. Literally, it's a change of mind and heart and spirit and a change in behavior. The first step is a turning away from what is false and artificial in the world. It's a moral change much bigger than turning away from cheating, lying and stealing although those changes are important. Turning away from all that is false will turn us away from the kind of materialism that chases after more money, the ambition that steps on other people in order to succeed, the self-centered life that is blind to a world starved for love. The questions we ask at a profession of faith or baptism start with the words, "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?"

That sounds so negative, doesn't it? It sounds like we're accusing a person of sin. That question is intended to remind us that the "ways of sin" are always open to us. Just as important, the power of sin remains operative in the world around us. Repentance begins by turning away from sin and evil.

The second step in the dance of repentance is the positive, active turn toward goodness, toward the way of Christ. Every person who suffers from an addiction not only needs to give up the unhealthy behavior, they also need to find and take up healthy behavior. Giving up drugs means making new friends. Giving up robbery means getting a legitimate job. Giving up bad grades means doing homework. In the case of these fishermen, it meant following Jesus. They dropped their nets and

walked away from the life they knew in order to accompany this wandering preacher. I imagine father Zebedee standing in the boat with his end of the net still in his hands, proud and sad at the same time. Proud of his sons for learning the fishing trade, and for following the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But, also sad that their faith means leaving to follow Jesus.

There is a danger we need to be aware of when we read about the calling of the disciples. Mark has compressed a lot of time into five verses so their decision seems incredibly abrupt. It is likely Jesus already knew Simon, Andrew, James and John before he says, "Follow me." They would have heard longer versions of Jesus' sermon than the nineteen words in verse 15. Jesus, after all, was becoming famous in Galilee.

The danger is that we will think our response to Jesus must exactly copy the response of the first disciples. I remember that as a boy I was enthralled by missionary stories from Africa. When a mission speaker asked if anyone felt called to follow Jesus, I thought I was being called to Africa. As I grew through adolescence, I had to learn, first, that I was not ready to be a missionary, and second that there were other ways God uses people in following Jesus. Many years later, God did send me to Africa for a few weeks where I preached to the largest and most enthusiastic congregation in my life. In Africa, however, I found that I was the one who needed to hear the gospel preached to me by African Christians as much or more as they needed to hear me.

The call to follow Jesus takes many shapes. Each of us follows in our own way. Some of us will be called to a vocational change. Following Jesus may disrupt a family as it did the family of Zebedee the fisherman. In other cases, it may include family. Jesus calls two sets of brothers in the first chapter of Mark. The common denominator is the urgency of making a response to Jesus.

If we believe his announcement that the kingdom of God has come near, we will want to say 'yes' to his invitation to join him. How do we know that the kingdom has come near, that Jesus is telling the truth? I can give you two pieces of evidence, one of grand, historic proportions and one much smaller but perhaps as persuasive.

The kingdom is coming near with the arrival of Jesus. He is the fulfillment of time. His effect on the history of the world has leveraged massive changes for good. I am not saying Christianity has always been a force for good. We've made our mistakes. I would argue that the influence of Jesus himself has been a blessing in many ways. Jesus taught a way of life that fosters peace and love. Moreover, he lived that way of life without the taint of moral snobbery. Jesus revealed a loving and powerful God who rules creation with a gracious willingness to repair our failures. And his words continue to plant the seeds of surprising hope for the human condition. When Jesus appears at the beginning of Mark's gospel, he ushers in the kingdom of God.

But, the evidence for God breaking in on our world is not confined to Jesus the Christ. Five year old Connor went every evening for two weeks with his mother to serve supper to the homeless men in the Pacem shelter. As you can imagine, one of the men I'll call Humphrey suffers from a mental illness. Humphrey would regularly seek out a corner of the room and eat his dinner facing the wall. One night, Connor's mother realized that her son was picking through the bread to find a cinnamon roll. She quietly told the boy that the bread was for the guests, and he would eat at home. Connor replied, "This is for Humphrey. He likes the cinnamon ones." Connor had made a connection with Humphrey, as children will sometimes do with the mentally ill. Just as important, Connor had connected with Jesus' invitation to feed the hungry. The kingdom of God had invaded his life and he welcomed it. Let those who have eyes to see, see the kingdom.

When the prophets of the economy proclaim that an economic recovery is coming, businesses will either disbelieve and hunker down for more bad times; or they will believe and start investing for better times. When the surgeon comes in after surgery and says, "The operation was a success. You're going to be much better," the patient also has choices. Disbelieving means hunkering down in bed and waiting to get worse. Believing means the patient will start taking food and follow directions for exercising a body that's getting better.

How will we respond to Jesus' announcement that the kingdom of God has come near? The kingdom is certainly not overwhelming the violence and meanness of human behavior so everyone is compelled to obey God's commands. Our moral judgment often is clouded with self-centered worries with the result that even good people make poor decisions. Disease and famine still stalk the world. One choice is to act as though Jesus was wrong and continue to depend upon violence and self-interest to save us, hoping that the four horsemen of the apocalypse, conquest, war, famine and death, will get the other guys first.

But, suppose Jesus is right. Suppose he is the vanguard of fulfillment, the true prophet, the point man for God's kingdom that is invading our world. Suppose the kingdom has come near in the generosity of a little child, or in the friendship of a neighbor. That is a kingdom I want to be part of. That's the kingdom come near to us at South Plains. Believe in the good news. Repent and follow when Jesus calls.