

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
January 21, 2024 – 3 Epiphany  
Mark 1:14-20  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This year a great many of our Sunday morning Gospel lessons will come from the Gospel of Mark. This Gospel was the earliest of the four Gospels, probably written between 64 and 72 CE, approximately 35 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. The writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source. Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the Gospels. Sometimes Mark includes what we might call just the "bare bones" of the accounts involving Jesus and others. We need to spend time thinking about these accounts, to imagine the human dimensions of them which Mark doesn't describe.

Mark gives no information about the conception, birth, childhood, or young adulthood of Jesus. This Gospel begins with John the Baptist – the voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, described by the prophet Isaiah. We get into the action immediately – one of Mark's favorite words, by the way. We see John, dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and baptizing many people in the Jordan River. Jesus' baptism by John is recorded and, in a very few words, Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness is described.

That brings us to this morning's lesson. "After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." Our first opportunity to pause for reflection. Jesus began his ministry when John was arrested by Herod Antipas, Herod the Great's son who eventually ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus goes into action himself because of this crisis. Isn't that what often happens in human lives, both personally and publicly? Perhaps you understand this from experience – a crisis of health prompts you to change your habits or a crisis in a personal relationship prompts you to finally make a decision you had been considering for some time. We see this same dynamic in history and in the history we are part of making today. Something terrible happens in the environment or in the economic, social, or political world, and people are moved to act.

Mark tells us that Jesus picked up where John the Baptist left off, saying "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Already there is a clear continuity of message in Mark's Gospel – Isaiah to John the Baptist to Jesus. God's story is continuing to unfold in the teaching and ministry of Jesus.

What is the first thing Jesus does? He gathers companions for the work he is about to do, the work of making disciples, described metaphorically as "fishing for people." The way Mark tells the story Jesus doesn't spend a lot of time considering whom he will call. As he walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw one pair of brothers and called them. He walked along further, saw another pair of brothers and called them. And in minutes a third of the company of the apostles is assembled. These were ordinary working men. Jesus called them while they were casting nets into the sea and mending nets in their boat – in other words, while they were busy at the work of earning a living. They weren't in the synagogue or the Temple in Jerusalem. They weren't hearing scripture or praying or offering a sacrifice to God. They were at work. We have inherited a tradition of venerating the apostles. We call them "saints" and name churches after them. It is easy to forget that they were ordinary people. But for us – ordinary people – it is comforting to remember that Jesus called and still calls ordinary people to do his work. As followers of Jesus what makes us special isn't so much our merits but Jesus himself and the work that Jesus calls us to do when we do it faithfully.

Mark tells us that when Jesus said to Simon and Andrew, James and John “Follow me,” all four men immediately left what they were doing and followed Jesus. Mark uses just a few words to describe an awesome and astonishing encounter with Jesus!

Ignatius of Loyola, the 16<sup>th</sup> century founder of The Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), gave Christianity and Christian spirituality a wonderful gift: Ignatius understood that imagination can powerfully deepen our relationship with God, especially imaginative reflection on scenes from the Gospels. In his book “Spiritual Exercises” Ignatius invites us to choose a Gospel story and prayerfully meditate on it, using our imaginations to enter the story as fully as we can. He guides us to put ourselves in the place of the characters and to be especially alert as we watch and listen to Jesus. This kind of imaginative prayer seeks the truth of the heart rather than the truth of facts. The person who prays this way may notice feelings and desires inspired by an encounter with Jesus. The purpose of this kind of imaginative encounter with scripture is to call forth a heartfelt desire to know Jesus and to follow him.

Let’s enter imaginatively into this morning’s passage from Mark’s Gospel. Feel free to close your eyes for this exercise. You could be any of the characters in the story – one of the brothers, Zebedee, one of the hired men. For now, imagine that you are Simon Peter. You are standing in the water near the shore of the Sea of Galilee with your brother Andrew. The fishing net is in your hand. What is the weather like? Hot and sunny? Cloudy? Are there storm clouds out over the sea, threatening a sudden squall of wind and rain? What are the smells – fish, the sea? What noises surround you? Is Andrew talking to you? Are there other men nearby working and talking, laughing or shouting? Are sea birds calling to each other? What sound does the rope of the fishing net make? How are you feeling? Are you hungry, tired? Do your muscles ache or are you feeling strong and fit? What’s on your mind – your wife and her mother at home; worry about the day’s catch, a meal you’re looking forward to sharing with your friends? How are you getting along today with Andrew?

You notice a man walking along the shore toward you. Have you seen him before? What does he look like? He’s coming close to you now. He stops just a few feet away and you can see his face. Is he smiling or looking serious? Your eyes meet his eyes. What is that like for you? He speaks to you and Andrew – what does his voice sound like? You hear him say “Follow me.” What goes on in your mind, in your heart when you hear these words? Something amazing has just happened. You and Andrew look at each other, drop your fishing net and walk with this man further along the shore. What thoughts are in your mind now, what feelings?

This is one way to enter more fully into the Gospel story, by putting yourself back in time to the scenes recorded in the Bible. Another approach is to imagine Jesus with you here and now, in the circumstances of your life. Simon Peter and Andrew were busy fishing. What are you busy with in your life – cooking, cleaning, reading, shoveling snow, sitting at your computer working or catching up on the news, grocery shopping, watching television, working in an office? Imagine yourself busy doing something that you do regularly. Then you see Jesus walking toward you. You hear him say “Follow me.” Imagine what you might have to drop and leave behind to follow him: perhaps some possessions; perhaps an activity or a habit; perhaps an attitude of resentment or prejudice; perhaps a feeling of fear or worry, of sorrow or grief. How does it feel to walk away from whatever you leave behind? How does it feel to follow Jesus?

As Saint Ignatius knew well, the Gospel story is a living story with the power to change lives dramatically. Jesus has not stopped calling disciples. He is calling us. In the words of this morning’s Collect, “Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ.” Amen.