



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 2018

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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Jonah 3:1-5, 10 | Psalm 62:6-14 | 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 | Mark 1:14-20

Jesus' opening words from Mark's Gospel this morning can be seen as summarizing his entire teaching: "The time is fulfilled." Time is up, and at the right time, God's chosen time, God has stepped into human history. "The kingdom of God has come near." The rule of God is beginning. John the Baptist proclaimed the imminent coming of Jesus, and Jesus appears. Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God, and his rule appears, present yet hidden. "Repent, and believe in the good news." Here he calls us to do two things: turn our lives in a new direction for the better; and pay attention to the kingdom which is arriving. This is the good news. The kingdom is already arriving, because where Jesus is, there the rule and the power of God's kingdom is already underway. The ancient Jewish prayer, "May God establish his kingdom in our lifetime," has been answered.

Jonah tells us that we should repent, or God will destroy us. Jesus tells us to turn from our wrongdoing, and also to do something else: to believe in the good news from God. God has done a new thing; a very different age has dawned. Turning to God having become aware of our wrong actions and values; turning to God who forgives, and away from a world view which values self, money, status, and power; turning instead to valuing others and their well-being; valuing justice, freedom, and peace: here is the real news, not the fake news of our world, a world that is still being seriously challenged by this urgent turning point in time.

Mark's Gospel begins like an alarm clock persistently declaring the time, calling us to do something. Or, like an airport announcement for a given flight. Hundreds in the terminal rushing around don't even hear what is said; others hear it, but having made reservations for another destination, pay no attention. Those aware of what destination they want, and already awaiting the announcement, set out with determination to their gate. A lot depends on which group we join in response to Jesus' announcement.

As soon as Jesus announces the kingdom of God, the new beginning, he calls certain persons to enter it. Did he know that they were somehow waiting for it? "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately Simon and Andrew the fishermen leave their nets and follow him in his mis-

sion. No prior contact; and no regret for giving up what they were good at: they will now be fishers for people. They are not being called to be observers. Repentance means turning around the gifts God gave you and using them for new tasks in a new life. But Simon and Andrew and James and John are not being assigned tasks, like a to-do list. They are assigned an identity, part of the repentance and new direction their lives are called to. And we are not assigned tasks but invited to take up the identity of followers of Jesus, each in his or her own way. We are called to learn lessons for living.

Commercial fishing in Galilee in Jesus' time used nets, not hooks. This is a rather important fact for understanding Jesus' metaphor, Follow me and I will make you fishers of folk. The Gospel vocation, bringing humanity to God, does not involve a solitary fisher baiting and catching individual converts, but involves building up community.

Men and women are splashed into new community and relationship in baptism; the Church is the community of the Gospel, the community of faith, not a collection of individuals. In the beginning of his work, Jesus makes this clear by calling his initial followers in tandem: Simon and his brother Andrew; he said to them both, Follow me. James and his brother John; he called them both simultaneously. Later he called the Apostles likewise in pairs, and sent the missionary seventy out two by two, in pairs. We get the idea that he is interested in guiding a whole school of fish, a converted community, into the net of God's love.

What got this all going? What was the precipitating act for Simon, Andrew and all the others, well-employed grown men and women, to abandon families, income and their security, to go wandering in the outback of Palestine with a mendicant rabbi? What was the precipitating crisis? Mark tells us this morning: "After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." In the wake of the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, mentor and model, by the government's military power, everything has changed. A crisis is come. And Jesus issues what amounts to an invitation to a conspiracy which will bring all ordinary history to a close. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of

God has come near.” Jesus’ approach to these strangers by the Sea of Galilee is the Church’s first preaching to the world. It begins in response to an act of oppression and violence which divides people. It is not the time to be only observers. And it continues today with us when we seek to respond to suffering, to feed the hungry, support the stranger and the outcast, and continue the unifying work of Jesus in our own time and place.

Jesus came to those he called as one unknown to them. Confronted with his message, they were confronted with the kingdom of God. We here claim to know who he is. We pray Your kingdom come. The appropriate response then and now is the same: repent, think about examining and perhaps changing the direction of our lives, and believe it’s good news for us. For when the good news is proclaimed it is decision time for us too.

In the rest of Mark’s Gospel these initial followers won’t fare very well. Seldom will their performance match the promise of this first response to Jesus. They like us will pass through the doubts and trials and conflicts and setbacks and sufferings in which Jesus shared, the Jesus who has set us his followers to follow him through our own ways forward. The true good news is that failure in attempts to follow Jesus does not bar them or us from his kingdom any more than salvation is the result of our obedience. He came to them as one unknown; he comes differently, but no less urgently, to us, to his Church, to the Body of Christ gathered in this place, and speaks to us the same words: Follow me, and he sets us to the work which he has to fulfill for our time. And by following, we like Simon and Andrew and all the rest can learn in this experience who he is, and who we can become. Amen.