

“Daring Invitation”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; December 29, 2019

Mark 1:1-20

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

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”*

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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.” 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. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

These days after Christmas are a little treasure that I rediscover every year. They exist here in an overlooked space on the calendar, a quiet little valley between the mountain peaks of Christmas and New Years. People are so hurried and busy before Christmas, but now we might experience some real Sabbath. These days of leisure following Christmas are something like the “vacation after vacation” which we long for at other times of the year.

So it’s a little rude to have Mark’s busy little gospel intrude today on our holiday rest. We’re still in a food coma, but Mark crashes into us fast enough to cause whiplash. We’ll be working our way through this gospel between Christmas and Easter this year, and Mark wastes *no* time getting started. This shortest, earliest gospel begins with a quick trumpet fanfare. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” After that, it’s off to the races. John the Baptist—wilderness, preaching, repentance, “one more powerful than I is coming”. Then Jesus appears—no infant, but a fully-grown man. In swift succession over five verses: Jesus is baptized, blessed by the Holy Spirit dove, driven into the wilderness, tempted by Satan, and served by angels. John the Baptist’s subsequent arrest gets less than a sentence of mention, then Jesus’ public ministry has begun. He declares the four-fold good news of God: time is fulfilled, kingdom is near, repent, believe. And by the time you get to the end of verse 20 Jesus has already called not one but two pairs of brothers to be the first disciples. It’s like the pilot episode of a TV

show, where setting, plot and characters are swiftly set in motion before the storyline unfolds more gradually from week to week.

Except Mark's gospel *never* really slows down—all the action happens “immediately”, to use a favorite Markan word. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew to fish for people instead, “and immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Same thing with James and John a few steps later: “Immediately he called them” and they left father, hired hands and boat behind. Poor Zebedee's head must spin at how fast this all happens! The good news of God cannot wait for the holiday slumber to wear off—it begins immediately.

Maybe that's because Mark knows the gospel will not be Good News if it takes too long in coming. Because not all of us are stuffed and satisfied these days. In fact, as I cast my imagination into many of our homes this week, I wonder if there might be as much pain as comfort in Christmas. In one place, the family gathering has revealed discord rather than harmony. At another address, no place is set at the table for the daughter not spoken to in years. Her absence was felt, though not acknowledged. Over here is someone who was alone on Christmas, who feels alone every day of the year. There goes a woman to visit her father, who doesn't recognize her any more. Some long to be in love, and some wonder about leaving because the love has grown cold. Seniors dread the decay of body and mind, or the long cold of January when nobody will come by. Single parents wonder whether to call in sick or leave the kids by themselves again. The gospel comes for every such person who is God-beloved yet also feeling broken, which is to say: for you, for me, for all.

The Good News that cannot wait is this. God so loves the world that God comes to earth to show us life and lead us into it. God chooses birth to an unwed teenage mother, at the darkest time of the year, during mass migration, in a barn barely fit for animals. God's crazy love for the world, even at its most broken, led to Jesus born when Herod would slaughter children, when prophets were beheaded, when religious leaders circled the wagons of tradition in fear, and when Rome crucified those who proclaimed the kingdom of God. Despite all this, our Statement of Faith in the United Church of Christ declares: “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot.” This is how fiercely the Creator of the Universe loves us. Because of God's birth into human flesh, we are never completely alone, never beyond hope, never worthless.

This Good News of God announced by Jesus interrupts sugary holiday reverie—so be it. God's incarnation does not wait for a more comfortable or convenient time. The Good News comes to interrupt our desolation, despair and defeatism as well. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;” Jesus says, “repent [or, ‘be of a new mind’], and believe in the good news.” This is a daring invitation for new and renewed discipleship today, just as surely as it came to Simon, Andrew, James and John.

Discipleship may look different for us though, not necessarily the once-and-for all decision of these first disciples. (I hope so, for the sake of all Zebedees out there in the boats who still need help fishing!) Rather than being a once-and-done thing, Rev. Eugene Peterson describes discipleship as “a long obedience in the same direction.” [Maya Angelou has said](#) something similar: “I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business.... It's not something where you think, ‘Oh, I've got it done. I did it all day—hot diggity.’ The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, ‘Hmmm. I only blew it 86 times. Not bad.’ I'm trying to be a Christian.”

Each day ahead will bring opportunities for choosing again to follow Jesus in the long obedience of loving God and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. We are enlisted into the journey of discipleship with him, offering to all who suffer the impatient Good News of peace, rescue and deliverance. When Christ goes by us on the lakeshore this week, as we are back at the fishing of our everyday lives, how will we respond? We are called to share in our words and actions the Good News that cannot wait. Will we have the faith to respond like the first disciples? Immediately? May it be so.