

Leaving the Boat
Based on Mark 1:14-20
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Mark's gospel tells us the content of Jesus' preaching in less than one sentence, one biblical verse. "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news." Was that all he said? Did he go to the village square or the synagogue, stand up and say one sentence, and then move on to the next village? Surely he expanded on that theme a little bit? Mark's gospel itself is succinct, even condensed, and Jesus in this gospel is a man of few words. The gospel doesn't so much summarize what Jesus preaches as concentrate it. It's as if the big message that Jesus has come to convey is folded up a million times until it fits into the pages of the gospel. And when we come across it there, our job is to unfold it, and keep unfolding, until the content of Jesus' preaching fills up our whole lives.

Jesus preaches that the kingdom of God has come near, that it is at hand. He doesn't say that the kingdom is coming, any day now. And he doesn't say, in this gospel that the kingdom of God is among you. He says that the kingdom has come near. It's at hand, near enough to see, maybe near enough to grasp, maybe even near enough to experience. That world where God is fully in charge, where justice rolls down like waters, where they do not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain—it's close. It isn't in some alternate universe or waiting for us after death, it's right there, almost visible, definitely accessible.

Because the reign of God is so near, Jesus preaches that we should repent. We should turn away from the bad stuff, the selfishness, the exploitation of our neighbor or the apathy about what happens to our neighbor, apathy about the results of our own actions. As the prophet Isaiah says six centuries before Jesus, cease to do evil, learn to do good. We should see all the wrong we are involved in for what it is and turn away, and then believe the good news. That God is near, that God will restore and renew and mend what was broken. That there is a God.

What is it in Jesus' preaching or in his presence that stops the would-be disciples in their tracks? What is it that makes them drop their nets, their father, their whole lives as they have lived them until this point, and follow this total stranger? Is it the hope of experiencing the harmony and hope of the kingdom of God? Is it a

desire to turn away from their own sins, their own toxic relationships? Is it the prospect of being involved in something positive and world-changing, the euphoria of joining what scholars sometimes call the Jesus Movement.

Maybe it's just the possibility of something beyond simply survival. Maybe Jesus conveys to them the truth that there is something more to life than just existing. More to it than feeding oneself and one's family, only to get hungry again. Maybe they are tired of getting in the boat at dawn and fishing for hours, and mending nets and repairing the boat when they are not fishing, only to get up and do it all again the next day, and the next day. Maybe they've been asking themselves, what exactly is the point?

On the other hand, maybe this is the wrong question. Maybe what we should ask is, why does Jesus ask these unremarkable fishers to follow him? Why does he choose these guys as his disciples? Why not go find some promising young scholars in the synagogue? Why not find twelve people more like that rich guy who approaches him later, saying, "I've kept the commandments all my life, what more should I do?" Why not choose someone, at least, who comes to him, rather than someone he has to go and call?

Maybe those two questions answer each other. The kingdom of God coming near, the necessity to repent and believe the good news, that is what the rich man who keeps all the commandments is still missing. But it's also what the average hardworking fisherman is missing. You don't have to be a scholar or a mystic to feel the need for repentance and for meaning, you don't have to be super educated to hear the good news that there is a better way of living. Jesus calls these regular guys, these average Joes--as Sarah Palin once said, Joe Six-pack kind of guys—that always struck me as an insult, by the way. Pretty sure that if I were a beer-drinking, football watching steelworker, I would not enjoy being referred to as Joe Six-pack. I also wonder is there a Joanna Six-pack? Or is it just a guy thing? But I digress.

The point is that Peter and James and John and Andrew drop everything and follow him, I'm guessing, because Jesus offers something more, a greater purpose and a deeper meaning. He preaches that there is a reason to repent of our sins, that it makes sense to leave selfishness and apathy and cruelty behind, because the better world is just within our grasp. Jesus calls these guys, these regular guys, because they are there, and why not? Maybe because he knows at a glance that they are longing for something more, wondering what's missing in their lives. Maybe because there aren't a lot of qualifications for being Jesus' disciple. Be a

fisherman, a tax collector, a homemaker, a prostitute, a CEO—as long as you are willing to drop it all, to repent, and to believe in a better way.

I'll leave you with someone else's words on the subject. The poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes recently posted a poem about Jesus calling the fishers to be fishers of people.¹ After expressing his doubt that the point was really to go out and hook people in a kind of manipulative way, the poet notices:

Fishers know where the fish are and go there;
they learn to think like fish; they value fish.
Their lives are centered around fish.

Become attentive to people, Jesus meant,
go where they are,
let their beauty flash before you.
Center your life around them and their well-being.

He might have said to Matthew,
pay attention to the details of people like you do to taxes.
Or to an auto mechanic, that's great,
now can you do that for people?

What do you know a lot about?
Imagine becoming that adept
with souls, with relationships,
with how we live together.
Follow Jesus, and you can become
an investment banker of souls,

a painter of people, a gardener of society.
Just follow, and you'll discover what it means.

¹ Unfoldinglight.net