

Sermon on Mark 1:14-20

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SCRIPTURE READING — MARK 1:14-20 (NRSV)

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

SERMON

UPSET: In this passage we see something that has long puzzled Christians. We see four disciples drop everything and follow Jesus. Two of them, we are told, follow “immediately.” Why would they leave all that they knew and families that they presumably loved and follow Jesus here at the very beginning of his ministry.

Scholars and ordinary Christians alike have long attempted to understand what it was about Jesus that caused these four and others to leave everything and follow someone they had only just met.

DEEPENING: The scene that forms in our mind is almost bucolic, that is almost like something in a painting by an old master. The disciples casting their nets, Jesus walking along the shore, the waves lapping at his feet, the sun setting in the distance.

That's the way I saw it until three years ago, when I read what historian Diana Butler Bass had to say about it. She posted a 23 part "tweet storm" [Explain] with a perspective that I had never heard before.

Now as I said last week, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter aren't the best place to get the news. But despite my theological differences with Bass, her historical work is quite solid.

And because I spent quite a bit of time checking what she said, I can tell you that this "tweet storm" is also a solid bit of historical writing.

[And when I say quite a bit of time, I mean quite a bit of time. Have you read K. C. Hanson's excellent piece titled "The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition" in the *Biblical Theology Bulletin*? I have. (I read it so that you don't have to.)]

But I'm getting off track, I want to share a lightly edited portion of Bass's tweet storm:

Fishing was one of the most miserable jobs in the ancient world. Ancient historians said that it's status was barely above that of a beggar.

Fishermen were usually part of kinship networks, where families struggled together to catch enough to pay the [heavy] and regressive taxes placed upon them and have a pittance left over to live on.

It was often migrant work as well—needing to follow the fish—and involved difficult physical and natural hazards.

Ancient fishing wasn't a business that would make you rich. And it sure wasn't a hobby. It was hard work with little reward and great risk—and it was near the bottom of the social-economic structure of the Roman Empire.

Not only was fishing a low-status job with poverty-level wages, but fishing was a point of political tension in Jesus' time.

For hundreds of years, throughout multiple generations, those kinship groups had fished on the Sea of Galilee, barely surviving. But, in 20 [AD], Herod decided he

wanted to impress Emperor Tiberius and build a great new city—Tiberias—in his honor on the Sea of Galilee, thus displacing local fishing communities.

To pay for the city he raised taxes and fees on fishing.

[Sidenote: And then King Herod used the very city they had paid for with their taxes and fees to exert more control over and extract more money from them displaced.]

When Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee, he's not a tourist admiring the view. He's purposefully starting his ministry in the midst of an oppressed, displaced, impoverished group of people who were being victimized in a real estate development project for the super elite.

And Jesus said to them, "The Kingdom of God begins right here. Right now. Follow me."

The story says that the fishermen dropped their nets immediately and followed him.

He wasn't inviting them to a place of heavenly rest, eternal salvation in the clouds. He was inviting them to throw off oppression, to join a political movement that he referred to by the ancient prophetic description of "the kingdom of God."

This was a political summons, but not within our usual categories of liberal and conservative or progressive and traditional. The Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is neither a Republican vision nor a Democratic project.

The Kingdom is concerned with many of the things we normally think of as "political issues," but it doesn't break down along our familiar partisan lines.

It's political in the sense of how we order our life together in community, but it's not partisan in the sense of campaigning for office because the top position is already taken. Jesus is Lord and Herod, Tiberius, and the President, are not.

Furthermore the Kingdom agenda benefits not only the oppressed, but also the oppressors.

Jesus called not only Simon and Andrew and James and John but also Levi the Tax Collector, a low level bureaucrat who made his living off the very oppressive system that the fishermen were leaving. (Mark 2:13-14)

Jesus went to a place where people were suffering. He went to a place where almost everything they produced was systematically taken from them. A place where wealth flowed forever upward. He went to people who were trapped in poverty and could not escape.

And so, when Jesus called some of those people to follow him they had no reason to hesitate. What they were doing wasn't working.

GOSPEL: And Jesus had a message that spoke not only to their spiritual needs and their place in the life to come, but to their real, concrete, economic and political problems in this life.

SUDDEN SHIFT: Do we? Are we as Christians living and sharing our faith in a way that speaks to the real, concrete problems that people have in this life?

UNPACKING: To further paraphrase Bass:

Jesus still walks on the shores, he still walks through our city streets and our dusty county roads. Jesus still calls out to those abused by empire, he still reaches out to those oppressed by economic systems designed for the good of a few at the expense of the many, he still places himself in the midst of those struggling to survive. He still calls out "The kingdom of God is near! Follow me!"

Are we following close enough behind Jesus to echo his good news, or is he alone proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come near.

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; let us change direction a bit, and more closely follow King Jesus.

SERMON RESOURCES

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