

For Mark 1:1-20 (New American Standard Bible) Again with a debt to M. Eugene Boring in his commentary “Mark” published by Westminster John Knox Press

(some notes we will go over fairly quickly at the beginning of the sermon)

Title of the gospel:

The **beginning** of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

(“beginning” reminds us of Genesis 1, can also mean, the “norm, the standard”)

Prologue 1:2-15 (Voice off stage that speaks from heaven)

^{2(B)}As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"^(C)BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU,
WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; (**Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1**)

(Malachi is quoting Exodus 23 where the promise is to “send an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared”. It is a promise that God will bring the people that he has rescued from Egypt safely into the promised land. Malachi picks up that quote and uses it to refer to one who will restore the temple to what it is supposed to be, a place with room for people from all nations to come to God to pray.)

^{3(D)}THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,
'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD,
MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" (**Isaiah 40**)

(Isaiah 40 is the beginning of the second half of Isaiah, that begins, “comfort, comfort my people”, the full quote above includes these words of hope for creation: “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind shall see it together.”

This story will be about a great new work that God is doing in the world to bring his people safely home, to restore relationship with all people and to restore all creation. We are about to see just how God will do this.

(Curtain opens and we see John the Baptizer preparing the way of the Lord)

⁴John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness ^{(a)(E)}preaching a baptism of repentance for the ^(E)forgiveness of sins.

⁵And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

⁶John was clothed with camel's hair and wore ^(G)a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. (reference to **Elijah 2 Kings 1:8**)

⁷And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals.

⁸"I baptized you ^[b]with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism of Jesus

^{9(H)} And it came to pass in those days Jesus ^(J)came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him;

¹¹and a voice came out of the heavens: "^(J)You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

^{12(K)}Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness.

¹³And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by ^(L)Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

(evokes experience of Israel in the wilderness and of Elijah, who was also fed by angels)

John's ministry has been to prepare the way of the Lord by calling people to confess their sins. That is always the first way to prepare for the coming of the Lord. The **Times of London** invited several eminent authors to write essays on the theme "What's Wrong with the World?" G. K Chesterton's contribution took the form of a letter:

Dear Sirs,

I am.

Sincerely yours,

G. K. Chesterton^[10]

When John's ministry of preparation is over, he is taken "offstage" and never appears again in Mark's gospel.

^{14(M)}Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, ^(N)preaching the gospel of God,

¹⁵and saying, "^(O)The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; ^(P)repent and believe in the gospel."

So Mark has set the stage. He is about to tell us the story of a great work of God. He reminds us that God wants to live with his people, that he wants creation restored, that he wants life to open up. God wants to deal with war, AIDS, hunger, refugees who have no home. God wants to see an economy that helps all people to thrive. He wants to see the spiritual forces that keep us locked in addictive cycles broken. He wants to deal with crime and family violence and climate change. God wants to make all things new.

If you were king of the world for a day and if you had it in your heart to make lasting and good change, what would you do?

Think about that for a moment, then let's see what Jesus does.

¹⁶As He was passing by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen.

¹⁷And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you into fishermen who fish for people."

¹⁸Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

¹⁹Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets.

²⁰Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him.

The first time in this gospel that we hear Jesus' voice, he says,
"Follow me".

He says it to two random fishermen casting their nets. They do not see him. They have not been meditating on spiritual things and wishing they could become evangelists.

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”.

They follow.

He says it again to the two sons of Zebedee, James and John.

They follow.

What catches your attention at this scene?

Lots of questions come to mind for me...

How will they fish for people?

Where is Jesus going?

What happened to the boat and nets?

What did Zebedee do when his sons left to follow Jesus?

It's easy to get hooked on questions like this.

I got kind of distracted for a half a day earlier this week. I did learn that fishing in that day was hard, back breaking work. It did not mean sitting in a canoe or on a dock with a line in the water and a cooler by your feet. And I learned that “fishing

for men” has a long history in the Bible and outside of the Bible. It’s a way to describe being part of the work of God in the world. It’s about catching all kinds of “fish” and then, at the last day they will be sorted out. It is like harvesting. Jesus talks about that too in a different gospel. But the thing that I find stunning is that Jesus calls four random people to be **part of** this great restoring work of God in the world. God’s answer in Jesus to AIDS and war and Hunger and crime and economic crises and climate change is to say, “follow me”.

We got to the end of this gospel last Sunday and were turned around and sent back to the beginning, to Galilee with the promise that Jesus will meet us there, we find him here, calling **us too**.

Jesus is calling us. He wants to make us into fishers of men right here in land locked Alberta. If we are builders, he might say, “follow me and I will make you into builders of my kingdom”. If we are auditors or accountants, Jesus might say, “Follow me, and I will make you into those who audit my people”.

By Tuesday around lunch time it finally dawned on me that none of those questions are **our** responsibility. **Our** responsibility lies in a different direction.

Maybe you saw this right away, but it took me a while.

Jesus says, “Follow me”.

And **I** will make you fishers of men.

Who makes us into fishers of men? Who draws us into this great work of God in the world?

Jesus does that.

Our job is to follow.

Sometimes it involves actually leaving our chosen occupations, but not always. In fact, what we rarely notice is that in chapter 1:29 Jesus and his four new friends go to Simon and Andrew's house. And through his ministry Jesus seemed to have access to boats as needed. John tells us that after Jesus' resurrection Peter goes fishing and takes some of the others with him.

But let's set that aside now and focus on what Jesus wants **us** to do.

Literally, here is what he says:

"Come, walk behind me in the path I myself walk".

"Come follow me into the kind of life that I myself live".

The first four people jump up and follow Jesus. For the rest of the gospel they and we learn what they have jumped into. As they followed They saw people set free from demons, and healed from blindness and

fed by the thousands, they heard amazing teaching and they saw people come to Jesus and they were part of it all.

We jump up and follow him here in St. Albert. We see people set free from evil, we see eyes opened to Jesus and we see lives changed and we are part of it all. By his grace Jesus does not seem to wait until we reach some holy level before he involves us in the fishing.

That is a relief because followership did not come naturally to the disciples and it does not come naturally to us either. Reading our Bible and praying every day really helps, but this is bigger. It is like climbing a mountain and watching where the person leading you puts each hand and foot and how they distribute their weight and then doing the same thing as you come behind.

There are different reasons we find it hard to stay behind Jesus.

1. We are not wired that way. None of us are. Here's a bit of my own story.

I was wired from babyhood to think that I could and should do it all. I am a second generation immigrant kid. Oldest son. Farm boy.

I think the third word I learned after "Mom" and "Dad" was "chores".

Our parents struggled to keep the farm going, and my dad had a bad back. They needed me to do whatever I could. I loved to work hard and got lots of affirmation for doing it. I could drive a tractor before I went to school and by the time I was in high school my parents could go to Holland and leave me in charge of the farm.

When Jesus called me from the manure spreader, he said, "Follow me and I will spread the gospel through you".

But everything in me was programmed to think, "I can do it, I should do it".

Most people were happy to let me do just that. But Jesus showed me, in the life of someone else, just how disastrous a way that was. And he sent some insightful people, early on, who tried to call me on it. I wouldn't listen, or couldn't hear them. When Audrey and I came here to meet with the congregation in the spring of 98, Paul L asked the best question of the evening. "What would you expect from the congregation?"

I said something, but really I had no answer because I thought I could and should do it all. I wasn't very good at identifying the kind of help I needed from anyone.

For ten years now (really all my life) I have had to learn that I first need to **follow** Jesus. To stay behind him, to see that he does not call me to do everything (that never worked anyway).

The harshest words we hear from Jesus come in that “rebukefest” he has with Peter in chapter 8. Peter tells Jesus to be quiet about all that “rejection and dying stuff”. What Peter is really saying is, “I know a better way Jesus. You follow me!”

Maybe now we hear Jesus’ words in a different light, “Get behind me!” “Get back in line”. “I am leading the way here”.

Jesus calls us to **follow**. To see where he is walking and to stay close behind, but always **behind**. What you and I need to do in our personal lives and in our friendships and families is to try to see where Jesus is leading us and then follow him. As a congregation we need to see where he is walking in “Galilee”/Grandin, or in other places but always follow him.

The second challenge about following Jesus is that Jesus goes into scary places.

His path, like ours begins in baptism. With Jesus we hear the voice of our Father in the heavens who now also says to you and me, “you are my son, you are my daughter, I love you!”. That’s all good. But then Jesus’ path goes into mission and into danger and persecution that costs Jesus his life.

And even though we know that God raised him from the dead, that God said, “the biggest YES ever” to the life of Jesus, we still fear that following Jesus will in some way cost us our life.

And he says, “Follow me”.

Jesus walks right into conflict with others. When he is challenged he responds openly when it would be safer to run away.

Jesus suffers hurt from others. Even the worst hurt of betrayal by his closest friends. And he forgives that hurt. It feels safer to us to hold on to our hatred and anger. We don't know what to do with it. (give it to Jesus)

Jesus never eats alone, but he always eats with the “wrong” people. In mixed crowds like public places or dinners, he always leads us to the forgotten ones, the ones with bad reputations. Jesus does not care about our comfort zones. He goes walking into conflict with dark spiritual forces and into conversations that would make a car pool very awkward.

He puts scary responsibilities in front of his followers. “You feed them”. “You heal”.

Maybe scariest of all, Jesus leads us in the way of being as open with God as a four year old.

And finally, we see Jesus openly asking his friends for the help he needs from them. He is not a lone super hero, not even a lone super saviour. Everywhere we see Jesus in this gospel, we see him with his friends.

Friends like Simon and Andrew, James and John.....

He's making them into fishermen who fish for people.

Friends like you and me. He's making us into fishermen who fish for people. But our job is to follow him.

May the Lord be gracious to you. May the Lord be gracious to me.
And all God's people said:

Amen

John Luth, pastor, Christian Reformed Church of St. Albert

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