



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

IF NOT NOW, THEN WHEN?

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Text: Mark 1:14–20

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.

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Last month, when I offered an Advent sermon called “Preparers of the Way,” I confessed to you my unabashed fondness for the character known to us as John the Baptist, who arrives on the scene every second Sunday of Advent, through the gift of the Revised Common Lectionary, with a familiarity I welcome and a call to repentance that challenges the touchstones of Advent we name as hope, peace, joy, and love.

That December day, the scripture reading was also from the first chapter of Mark, the first eight verses. Now just six verses later, after Jesus has been baptized by John in the Jordan River and spent 40 days in the wilderness, we learn that John has been arrested and Jesus has come to Galilee to commence his ministry. Yet the message of the Baptist is renewed through Jesus’ words: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Interesting that in verse 14 of the first chapter of the gospel of Mark we would read “The time is fulfilled.” Fulfilled suggests a completion, something that is finished—satisfactorily. But here the gospel story is just beginning . . . the calling of the first disciples has yet to even happen. It’s only chapter one. What has been fulfilled? The past only alluded to Jesus, the Messiah, God’s chosen one becoming reality. Now is the time of Jesus’s ministry, now is the time to usher in God’s kin-dom. All that has come before has led us to this moment, and now is the time for something to begin. God’s promised future is both now and at the same time, not yet . . . for in the mystery of time from God’s perspective the past, the present and the future are collapsed. Because now, some centuries later, we too cry in a collective voice that the time is now for something new to take hold, that the winds of change from pain and trauma and the crushing of humanity’s spirit have been fulfilled. And there is possibility once more that hope will prevail. And Jesus speaks into this moment, our moment, with both the ambiguity and the paradox of faith, to say “the kin-dom of God has come near. Repent, and believe in the good news.”

Like many of you, I held my breath too long and too often in these last weeks, wondering if a peaceful transfer of power in our nation’s flawed government had even a remote chance of actually happening. And as I watched the inauguration, with the rapid beat of my heart as musical backdrop, I began to exhale, also

aware that the trust in systems and power and politics and people still remains in crumpled, trampled heaps at the base of the Capitol steps. What time has been fulfilled? And what happens next?

Perhaps we take our cue from Jesus, for it appears that the first step in ushering in the kin-dom and proclaiming good news is to assemble companions so that the way is not journeyed alone. In the second part of today's scripture passage, Jesus sets his sight on four fishermen, who, when beckoned, literally drop everything and join Jesus in his ministry. Whether or not a relationship between Jesus and these fisherfolk had already been established is not known, which adds intrigue and raises the question—what would it take for us to completely abandon the life we know for one we cannot even yet imagine but find impossible to resist? These men knew nothing, really, of the consequence of their decision. How could they understand the kin-dom of God any more than we do? The world in which Jesus worked to conquer—through love and compassion and justice—seems eerily familiar to the world we know today: corrupted power, unequal wealth, racism, sexism, classism. This is the world into which Jesus determined the kin-dom of God was near, into which the good news already existed but remained unnoticed. I am not sure there is anything enticing about entering into a system desperate for change, except that in order for anything to transform someone must be willing to do something. These four men abandoned the only life they knew to accept a commission they knew nothing about. God's call is always into an uncertain future. They answered. What about us? Stories like these conversional call scenes give legitimacy to spontaneity, to acting on impulse, to trusting in the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We remember and prize those rare moments when, in the midst of life's prevalent ambiguities, choices suddenly became clear and we did something both bold and unimaginable . . . with no regret. Looking back on where we have been—in these last four years, in these last four centuries, since we first learned about COVID-19, since a police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd in our own backyard—time has indeed been fulfilled, but not in the way that brings life, that honors God, that creates kin-dom. If we do not change course and let go of the life we know for the one God promises, what are we waiting for? If not now, then when???

Simon and Andrew, James and John did not know what was ahead for them. And neither do we. But in what might only be described as God-inspired, even though it may appear to be a reckless hunch, they were catapulted by their Yes into new identities as disciples. The work involved to co-create God's kin-dom is to participate with transformative movement and brave all the resistance that is certain to be a part of any divine plan. To begin a new life, to embrace a new identity will take all the courage we might be able to muster and a trust not in the systems that were created to divide us, to denigrate and dissect our humanity but instead to place our confidence in the knowledge that is God, in the continuous call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly, to enter into deep and abiding relationship with one another. Theologian and professor Osvaldo Vena writes: "The purpose of Jesus' call to discipleship is not to take people out of a hostile world, promising them a better life in God's heavenly kingdom. Instead, his purpose is to change the world in such a way that it will cease to be the hostile place it is, so that God's reign can be established on earth. Doing this will require that we make a preferential option for the poor, the dispossessed, the excluded, and those who because of gender, sexual orientation, race, or class have been rendered invisible in our society. It will also require that we will courageously denounce the evils of our western culture and its arrogant project of globalization. In short, it will require that we change the romantic view of discipleship that we have inherited for one that, by addressing the socio-political realities of our world, may do more justice to Jesus' original intent."¹

Becoming a faithful disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime. The kin-dom of God is not the product of discipleship, but the precondition of it. Our scripture this morning confirms that which we already know:

¹Osvaldo Vena, "Commentary on Mark 1:14-20," *Working Preacher*, January 24, 2021, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-114-20-5> (accessed January 29, 2021).

that giving oneself over to a new vision that challenges the status quo brings with it risk and sacrifice. John the Baptist and Jesus' call to repentance reminds us that we cannot step into the boldness of a new identity if we drag with us the nets of our past, catching all the rocks and refuse along the way, until the burden paralyzes us. That does not mean that we do not have work to do to repair a fractured history but instead reminds us that we will not know the freedom of the promised good news until we acknowledge our mistakes, missteps and misdeeds. Doing so will release any blinders from our eyes so we can step into the unknown future with unhindered vision and embrace the light of hope.

Like millions of others, I was captivated by Inaugural Poet Amanda Gorman, who on Wednesday delivered with powerful authenticity her poem, "The Hill We Climb," during a few extraordinary moments of the Inauguration Ceremony. May her words continue to escort us into the new way of being a nation, a community, a change-maker, a disciple:

*And yes we are far from polished
far from pristine
but that doesn't mean we are
striving to form a union that is perfect
We are striving to forge a union with purpose
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us
but what stands before us*

*When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

My friends, "the time is fulfilled, and the kin-dom of God has come near. Repent, and believe in the good news."

Be brave enough to see it.

Be brave enough to be it.

Amen.