

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Advent we moved into year B of our three-year lectionary, and this is the year that we will be reading mostly from the Gospel according to Mark. Mark is the shortest of all the Gospels, only about 2/3 the length of Matthew and Luke, so we'll get some of John thrown in as well, like we did last week. John doesn't get his own year, but John gets used a lot in every year in the Lenten and Easter seasons. Every time we come back to Mark, I'm reminded of how much he manages to pack into so few words, and today is no exception. In fact, all three of our readings are pretty short today, and all three of them give us a lot to think about, but I'm going to focus on Mark today.

I mentioned last week that our Gospel readings this week and last are both about Jesus calling his disciples. But they are quite different in their details and emphases, and so we have more to consider today on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus – how we come to follow him, and what that following looks like. As I said last week, I think that this is a very timely topic, since recent events have reminded us that there are some very different takes out there these days on what it means to be a Christian, to trust and follow Jesus and to claim him as Christ and savior.

I want to quickly take a look at four important parts of Jesus calling his disciples in this short reading from Mark, and then try to connect them with our baptismal calling, which is how Jesus calls disciples after his resurrection, including each of us.

First, there is a call to repentance. Repentance is about change. The Greek work in the original text of Mark means to have a change of mind or attitude, and it implies a resulting change in behavior. A call to repentance means that things as they are now are not as they are meant to be. There are two things about Jesus' call to repentance here that I want us to notice, both from this text and from the larger biblical context. First, Jesus' call is linked to John the Baptist who came before him. You'll remember that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Today's reading begins by noting that John has been arrested. And yet the call to repentance continues. We may resist God's call to repentance, but God will not be silenced on this matter. The call remains, even after John is beheaded, even after Jesus is crucified. The other thing to notice here is that the message of repentance is for everyone. Those who came for John's baptism included "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." (Mk 1:5) I am quite sure that there were some who were much more responsible for the violence, oppression, corruption, and poverty of those days than were others. And I'm sure that both John and Jesus knew that too. Yet their calls to repent were made to everyone. We're all in this together, as it has become fashionable to say.

Second, the call to repentance goes hand in hand with the call to believe the good news. That's because there is a connection between repentance and the good news of the gospel. I've spoken before of the meaning of the word "gospel" or "good news" in the ancient world. It meant life-changing good news like the report of victory in battle over the invading army that was coming to destroy your city. The good news that both John and Jesus proclaimed was this kind of life-changing news. It meant that the doom implied by the call to repentance was not inevitable. There is a kernel of this dynamic in the book of Jonah, from which our first reading today is taken. The fact that God has Jonah proclaim the destruction of Nineveh implied that there was a possibility of avoiding it, which is just what happened, and just what Jonah feared, which is the whole point of Jonah and another sermon that I'm not preaching today. The point here is that the good news of God's coming reign makes possible the repentance that both John and Jesus call for.

Third, there is urgency in both John and Jesus' call that is echoed in our reading from Jonah. "God is on the way," John claimed. "Forty more days," said Jonah. "The time is fulfilled," says

Jesus, which is a fancy way of saying, “the time is now,” or “time’s up!” Advertisers try to capitalize on this kind of urgency with “limited time only” ads. Political fundraisers have their “fundraising deadlines” and the news that “we’re being outspent” and “we haven’t reached our goal” to encourage you to contribute *now*. Amazon tells you that the item you’re looking at is the last one in stock: “better grab it before it’s too late.” Jesus’ message carries this kind of urgent importance. It’s a “drop everything else and pay attention” kind of message.

And fourth, Jesus’ message is “catching.” This is the first thing I noticed in studying this text this week. Where our translation has Jesus telling Simon and Andrew, “I will make you fish for people” the Greek has the more literal meaning, “I will make you become catchers of people.” The kind of fishing that these first disciples did was not about luring fish to a hook, but capturing them with a net. I think this means that the gospel, the good news of God in Jesus, is the kind of news that grabs you and compels your attention. It has the force of becoming “enthralled” by a story, which literally means, “enslaved,” or of falling in love, of being overpowered in a good way.

How do we connect this with our own call to discipleship through Holy Baptism? First, of course, repentance is part of the deal. The Adult Sunday School has just finished a class on racism and its connection to the sin we find ourselves in captivity to – because sin is catching too. Our task, in the time we had, was to recognize racism as one of the sins that we are caught up in. In our discussions we noticed how easy it was to point our fingers at others who were more obviously and overtly racist in their attitudes and actions. But we also noticed how that had the effect of taking the focus *off* the bigger collective and systemic problem of racism that we are all complicit in. Repentance is for all of us, dear people, even “good church people” like us. That’s why we include that brief order of confession and forgiveness almost every week.

Second, we can be bold to confess our *own* sin, even to acknowledge specific, uncomfortable, embarrassing sins like our participation in systems of racial injustice, because we know that in Jesus we have a way out of our captivity to sin. This promise of God forgiveness through Jesus’ death and resurrection means we that don’t have to waste our time and energy evading criticism or deflecting attention to others who seem worse than we are. We are freed to acknowledge the truth about who we are and the promise of the good life God intends for us and is working in us. We are freed also to take concrete steps in aligning our values and behaviors with who we have been declared to be in Holy Baptism, God’s own children, secure in the trust that when we fall, God will pick us up to try again.

Third, the time is now. The clock is ticking. The message of the gospel is not just one more item for the to-do list, or one more interesting news story to be filed away and read later. (I have a whole stack of those.) All of us have limited time in this life, some much more limited than others. Some of us will die soon, some sooner than expected. But all of us have an expiration date. Now is the time to hear and heed the promise of God that leads through death to life, and to realize that that promise is not only for when we die, but also for a life of integrity and joy here and now, on this side of the grave.

Finally, the message of the gospel is catching. When by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit we are empowered to “repent and believe the gospel,” our lives will be changed, and that kind of change is catching. It will affect and infect the lives of others, drawing them to the love and mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

May it be so. May God open our hearts to repentance and faith. May we be caught by the gospel so that we might become catchers of people, for the sake of the world that God loves. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.