

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 25, 2015
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 3:21-4:2
Psalm 130
I Corinthians 7:17-23
Mark 1:14-20

Each year at this time the lectionary puts us in a somewhat difficult position. We have barely had time to celebrate Jesus' birth and to discover him as the beloved child of God at his baptism, when the lectionary speeds our attention along to the launching of his public ministry and the call of the disciples. We have barely had time to pack up the crèche when we find ourselves standing on that dusty beach hearing Jesus call Simon, Andrew, James and John over the lapping of the waves.

This is Year B in our cycle of lectionary readings, where Mark's Gospel is the featured Gospel. It is the shortest Gospel, and most scholars believe it to be the first to be written. Because it will be featured a great deal this year, learning a few of Mark's key emphases is important to us.

So before we get to our text for this morning, let's start with the Gospel as a whole. One scholar describes Mark's Gospel this way:

Mark presents Jesus as the one who must cast the truth like a stone through a plate glass window. Even though he teaches in parables, he has no time to mince words or soft-pedal the Gospel. Mark's Jesus can be harsh and argumentative. The time has come for God's saving activity to break into the midst of God's people, and like a man

going around a village yelling “Fire!” the Gospel must be vigorously proclaimed to wake people up...Mark’s world is full of paradox, full of the least, the last, and the lost becoming the most, the first, and the found. It is a world where children, not wise adults, are the model of how to enter God’s dominion. It is a world full of surprises and reversals. [Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, 60)].

Those surprises and reversals come in many forms. We will be more likely to spot them if we keep two things in mind:

First – Mark’s point of view. Mark tells his story and presents his central character with an “apocalyptic” point of view. Here is what this means:

From Mark’s point of view, the world is a battleground between good and evil, between Satan and God, between humans and demons. If the world is to be freed from being in thrall to Satan, it must be liberated. the strong man must be overthrown by a stronger one...Those who are commonly thought to be rulers are not, from the apocalyptic viewpoint, the real rulers of this world. Behind them stand the real rulers, God and Satan, each with a host of servants. The apocalyptic mindset believes that it is what happens behind the canvas of history, or at least with the invisible forces working both in the spiritual and material realms, that really explains why things are as they are in this world. (Witherington, p. 61.)

In this way, Mark’s perspective is similar to that of John when he is on the island of Patmos and writes what is the last book of our New Testament. Folks need to look behind *what is going on* in order to discern *what is really going on*. And this cannot happen by human wisdom or cleverness. It requires *revelation* from beyond.

Second – it is important to distinguish what readers of Mark’s Gospel (like us) know, and what the characters in the story know. Readers know from the

outset that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, but the characters in the story have to have this truth revealed to them along the way. What may seem obvious to us may not seem obvious to those in the story, for they are not privy to the same inside information that you and I possess. Mark's Gospel tells the story of disciples who "gradually learn to see" these underlying realities. We should not be too hard on them. Seeing the narrative with the benefit of hindsight is a wonderful thing.

Ok, let's move to our text for today. Jesus seeks out two pairs of brothers, commercial fisherman by trade, and challenges them with a radical invitation to take up a new vocation -- fishing for people.

Mark is fond of the term "immediately," and he employs it a lot in his Gospel. I've always been somewhat intrigued and even puzzled by the matter-of-fact way in which Andrew, Peter, James and John respond to Jesus in this encounter.

Every time I read this text I ask myself: "What did Andrew, Peter, James and John *see* in Jesus, to leave everything behind and go with him like they did?"

Turns out I am not alone in my question. The ancient church Father Jerome also was puzzled by this radical course of action by these men. In a sermon on this passage, Jerome says:

There must have been something divinely compelling in the face of the Savior. Otherwise, they would not have acted so irrationally as to

follow a man whom they had never seen before. Does one leave a father to follow a man in whom he sees nothing more than he sees in his father? They left their father of the flesh to follow the Father of the Spirit. They did not leave a father; they found a Father. There was something divine in Jesus' very countenance that seeing, they could not resist. [Jerome, Homily 83]

May I ask each of you a question this morning? The question is this: What do you see in Jesus?

Do you see something compelling enough to abandon your own selfish desires and attitudes?

Do you see something compelling enough to lay aside your own wisdom and embrace his will and purpose for your life?

Do you see something compelling enough to trust him when things in your life don't make perfect sense?

Do you see something compelling enough to trust in him during times of sickness and calamity?

Do you see something compelling enough to embrace totally his call on your life, whatever that may be?

When was the last time you took a really good look at Jesus? And what did you see?

That's an important question this morning. But important as is it, it is not the most important question. There is a greater question. Do you know what it is?

The ultimate question is not "what do you see in Jesus?" The ultimate

question is: *What does Jesus see in you?*

I think there are two miracles that occur in this Gospel text. The first miracle is that Andrew, Peter, James and John saw and perceived something about Jesus that was extraordinary. This is Jerome's take on the text.

The second -- and perhaps greater miracle -- was that the God of the universe and the agent of Creation *saw* something in these men, and called them to participate in a collaborative mission to save the world.

There is a collection of early oral interpretations of the Scriptures compiled around 200 A.D. Known as the *Mishnah*. In the *Mishnah* there is written an intriguing piece of advice for those wanting to be disciples. The *Mishnah* says to such persons, "procure for yourself a teacher." The Hebrew word for "teacher" here is the word *rab*, from which the word "Rabbi" comes.

The common practice was that if you wanted to be a follower of a given teacher or Rabbi, it was your job to go and actively seek that person out, and seek permission to become his disciple.

But in the case of Andrew, Peter, James, and John, something is different. The typical pattern is not followed. These guys are not seeking anything. They are minding their own business, *mending* their fishing nets. The only thing they are looking for is a way to provide for their families. In the words of an Alan Jackson song, they're just "working hard and trying to make a living."

These men are not looking for Jesus! Jesus is looking for them! Would-be disciples are not seeking out the teacher; the Teacher is seeking out disciples. It's not so much that they see something in Jesus, but that Jesus sees something in them! (Remember last week: "I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip found you...")

The real miracle here is that what the Savior saw in *them*, he also sees in *us*. And his call to them is also a call to us. A call to be his beloved children, a call to leave behind our old way of life in order to embrace a new one, a call to bear witness to all those we meet that Jesus sees something *in them* that is special and unique.

Our collect today asks for God's grace, that we might answer readily Christ's call and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, so that we and the whole world might perceive the glory of his marvelous works.

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, I must tell you in all honesty that responding to that call will not be easy. It may take you to places you would rather not go. It may bind you together with people whom you would prefer to avoid.

Responding to this call will cost you your pride, your self-sufficiency, your ambition. It will change the way you earn and spend your money. It will alter the way you see the world, including your enemies. It will turn upside down

everything you think you know. It will challenge your deeply held assumptions. It will shake you to the very foundation.

I don't want to ask this, but I feel compelled to do so. *Are you sure you want to respond to this man's invitation? Are you really sure?*

The symbols of bread and wine – and the grace that comes through them – are free to us this morning. But know this: if you accept and receive that grace, *you are no longer free*. You are bound in love to the One who sees in you more than you can ever see in yourself, and who calls you to share with him the Father's work.

If Andrew, Peter, James, and John were here this morning, I have a hunch that this is what they might say to us as we make our way to the Table:

I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back, no turning back.

Though none go with me, still I will follow; though none go with me, still I will follow; though none go with me, still I will follow – no turning back, no turning back.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.