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Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 1:14-20

FULFILLED, COME NEAR

Many people have a red-letter Bible, those versions that have all the words attributed to Jesus so noted. In such an edition, to be read in red, the very first red-letter statement in the Gospel of Mark would be: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” That’s the first expression of the message Jesus was proclaiming that defined his ministry. He had been baptized and we heard of him being identified by a heavenly voice as a beloved son. He had spent forty days in the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan. Then, with the start of our reading for today, we hear that John the Baptist has been arrested, so Jesus knows from the start that his public ministry is likely to be risky. He does not initiate his ministry with this message: “Everything’s fine with the status quo. God’s reign is a long way off, so just keep doing what you have been doing.” He does not say, “God is ready to strike you down – bad news is on the way.” Nor does he say, “The good news is that you get to stay on the throne in your own monarchy.” Instead, he says, as if in red letters: “The time is now, God is the One in charge; turn toward God’s ways and believe the good news in store for you.”

Then we hear that Jesus tells some fishermen to follow him. He approaches two brothers, Simon and Andrew first, who are fishing with a net near the shore. Mark doesn’t include many details about the situation. We don’t know if fishing had been good or bad that day. We don’t know if one of the brothers had a sore back and was interested in something different. We don’t know if Jesus says more to them than, “Follow me and I will make you into someone who catches women and men instead of perch and bass.” There would be a different kind of casting if they were to do as he said. Afterwards Jesus approaches two other brothers, who are preparing for their next time of fishing by mending their nets. This second set of brothers is with their father, Zebedee, along with some hired men. We don’t know whether they got along well with their father and the hired help or not. We don’t

know if they knew Simon and Andrew or not and whether that had any influence on their decision. We simply are told that when Jesus said for them to follow, that they left their father in the boat with the hired help, and followed after him. There would be other things to mend besides nets.

There had been that message about repenting and believing the good news, but Jesus doesn't tell these people to stop doing something bad in order to follow him. He invites them to leave their productive efforts to provide for their families in order to follow him. In essence, Jesus indicates to them that there is something even more central to our lives than how we make a living; something even more urgent than what we might eat for our next meal. Come, follow me so you can experience God's reign and the good news for you and all people.

He does not order them to follow as if they were in the military and they salute his every order. Rather Jesus speaks, and there is something so inviting in his summons that they leave the security they had known to step toward something totally new. He doesn't say I'll lead you wherever you want to go. He says, "Follow me." He doesn't say they are invited as tourists who are just accompanying him as a guide and then at the end of a brief trip everyone will say, "goodbye." He says, "Follow me." He doesn't say come and I will show you a good time; I'll give you free tickets to the local chariot races or I'll give you a free meal or a free lottery ticket if you come with me. He says, "Follow me."

Somehow, he must have conveyed that in so doing, they would experience good news in such a way that they would come to believe in it. It would not be what some would hope for as good news, that everything was hunky-dory and they just needed to continue doing what they had done. Neither was it the kind of good news that they would get rewarded with wealth, power, long life, and fame if they followed him.

He conveyed a different kind of good news. Somehow, there must have been some sense even in a brief encounter that this Jesus who encouraged them to follow would help them learn and grow. With him, they could explore not just the Palestinian terrain around Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, but they could delve into the spiritual terrain of a deeper kind of living. They likely had been told about

God throughout their lives, but this would be an opportunity to encounter God and to learn more about themselves as well. This Jesus not only seemed to know what he was talking about; he knew whom he was talking about.

All of us humans know what brokenness is, in the dysfunctional ways we relate to one another, in the misguided priorities we follow. Jesus was sharing with them the good news that they could turn away from the brokenness they had known to a wholeness God intended for them. Here was the way not just to become a better person, but to become a better Simon, a better Andrew, a better James, a better John. This was a summons for them to find the best of themselves, better than they ever felt was possible, because God would be helping them do what they could not do on their own. This great opportunity had nothing to do with the reign of Caesar – it was the reign of God that had come close enough for them to follow. They would experience that God was for them and that God loved them. That was good news. They would see love personified in Jesus and he would teach them how to reflect toward others a divine love that had so generously been given to them. The time was now for their great opportunity. And by God's grace, they were able to say, "Yes, we will try to follow."

Friends, the same invitation for us to follow Jesus comes to you and to me. What we would leave behind wouldn't necessarily be nets or a parent, but would be our misguided priorities and selfish goals. We would need to leave behind hatred, bitterness, indifference and the worship of things. Here is a loving invitation to grow in love with God, to discover that those strangers around us are really our sisters and brothers. Here is an opportunity to set a new direction for our lives, that will enable us to grow through serving others. Jesus still says, "The time is now, God's reign is at hand; turn toward God and believe the good news God has for you and all people." Each day we do so is a red-letter day that opens the way to God's heart and to our own hearts as well. Let us say, "Yes," for Jesus is calling upon us to follow.