

“The Most Important Invitation You’ll Ever Receive”

Mark begins his account of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God
by quoting the prophet, Isaiah,

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way —
a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord....’”*

Mark continues by explaining that this prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist
who appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,
and proclaiming this message:

*“After me comes the one more powerful than I,
the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.
I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

And then Mark continues,

“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan
and as he was coming up out of the water,

he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness,

and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.

Whereas in Luke we hear the elaborate stories of shepherds and angels

and in Matthew we hear the rich stories of magi and stars,

in just 13 verses, Mark has set his story in the context of Old Testament prophecy,

introduced John the Baptist, and told of Jesus’ baptism and his temptation in the wilderness.

While stories rich in detail can cause our imaginations to soar,

there is sometimes a gift in the Cliff Notes version.

With Mark, we get an outline, the bare bones, the essentials,

which can help us to focus in on the central truth, instead of getting lost in peripheral details.

And so today we pick up after those first 13 verses with this one,

“After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

‘The time has come’ ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

According to Mark, this is the first thing Jesus says as he begins his ministry.

Now the trouble is that most of us have heard these stories of Jesus all of our lives,

and we’ve heard them so many times that they tend to wash over us like a hot shower,

comforting us and relaxing us and making us want to do nothing more

than to snuggle down under a blanket of familiarity and peace.

But sometimes reading Mark is like having the hot water kick out

and all of a sudden the water is cold, startling us awake, and making us take notice.

John had come preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins

and proclaiming that one more powerful than he was coming to baptize,

not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

And after John has been put in prison, Jesus bursts on the scene and says,

“The time has come! The kingdom of God is at hand!”

In just the same way as a topic sentence

both introduces and sums up everything that is to follow in a paragraph,
so these opening words of Jesus both introduce his ministry and sum up all that is to follow.

Listen to Jesus' words again and you'll hear 6 huge concepts packed into 3 short sentences:

The time is fulfilled

The kingdom of God

is at hand

Repent

and believe

the good news.

The time is fulfilled!

John had been the one sent to prepare the way.

John had pointed to one who was to come after him, one more powerful than he,

and as soon as John is put in prison, Jesus bursts on the scene

to say that what had been prophesied long ago was being fulfilled,

that the one about whom John had spoken was here,

that the waiting was over and what had been promised had at long last arrived.

The time is fulfilled!

The kingdom of God...

Now remember that we are reading these words

already knowing all of the things that Jesus is going to be saying about the kingdom of God. But at this point in his ministry, he has said nothing yet about it.

So the people who are hearing him – Simon, Andrew James, and John –

are only thinking about the kingdom of God as it was expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures,

a kingdom of this world, a kingdom based on military might,

a kingdom that means no more Roman occupiers, a literal kingdom, in the form of a monarchy,

with a descendant of David sitting on the throne as God had promised.

The kingdom of God was a literal kingdom.

And that kingdom was at hand.

To hear that the kingdom was at hand

would be like hearing that it was time to rise up and rebel and put the plan into action.

The way people would have heard these words of Jesus back then

would have been akin to those young revolutionaries back in the 1770s in this country

who knew that the time had come to overthrow the English,

and were just waiting for the signal to see if the expected attack would be by land or sea.

Or picture the Arab Spring, a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions

that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s,

as word came to the young revolutionaries via cell phones that now was the time to take action.

John, who had told people to get ready for the terrible and violent Day of the Lord,

had been arrested, and the one whom John had said would be more powerful than he was here.

The kingdom of God was at hand!

Of course, when Jesus used those words, "*the kingdom of God*",

he meant something very different from how the scriptures were generally interpreted,

and certainly something very different from what John the Baptist was expecting.

And yet there was one word that both John and Jesus used: *repent*.

For John repentance was about being sorry for your sins,
being washed clean of them in baptism,
and being set right with God before the great and terrible Day of the Lord arrived.

Jesus uses the same word,

but he does not connect it with being sorry or being forgiven or avoiding God's judgment.

John and Jesus use the same word, but they use it to point in entirely different directions.

Both men understood that the word "repent" meant to turn one's life around,

but for John, it had to do with past and future –

being forgiven the sins of the past so as to avoid punishment in the future,

and for Jesus, it was about the present moment,

and the opportunity the present moment always offers

to open oneself to the transformative work of God.

Repent, says Jesus. Turn your life around, says Jesus. Let go and let God, says Jesus.

Repent and believe.

And here as we have noted many times before,

that word "believe" is an absolutely terrible translation of the Greek.

When we use the word "believe" in English, we're talking about

accepting a particular intellectual concept as being true or genuine or factual.

To believe is to give intellectual assent.

But the word that Jesus used has nothing to do with agreeing with a concept.

The word that Jesus used should be translated, "trust".

Trust in the good news.

The good news.

Not in the great and terrible Day of the Lord. Not in avoiding God's punishment.

Not even in overthrowing the Roman occupiers.

Because all of those things contained as much bad news as good news.

But Jesus simply says to trust in the good news.

The time is fulfilled! The kingdom of God is at hand! Repent, and believe the good news!

Now there's no way that Simon or Andrew or James or John or anyone else

could have had a clue as to what Jesus was talking about.

And maybe even Jesus was not entirely clear.

Because those were just Jesus' opening words

and perhaps, in a way, they were addressed as much to himself as to anyone else.

He was simply announcing the vision that God had given him as his very first act of ministry,

a ministry that would take three years to develop and mature and be fulfilled.

And yet, when Jesus said, "*come, follow me*",

Simon and Andrew and James and John said yes to the invitation.

And this is where we get to the important part for us, because, as we hear these words of scripture,

Jesus is talking to us, to you and to me,

right now in this present moment and right here in this very place, and saying, "come & follow".

And here comes the part that I believe we are to take away today.

At once, Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed him.

At once, James and John left their father in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Following Jesus means more than joining at church and coming to worship and serving the less fortunate.

It means more than giving our tithes and offerings.

It means more than working for justice and peace.

For Simon and Andrew, it meant leaving their nets and their fishing business.

For James and John, it meant leaving their father

and the men they worked with and were probably friends with.

Following Jesus means we must be willing to leave everything in our lives behind –

our jobs, our families, and our friends – and follow Jesus, wherever he leads.

Now that doesn't mean that Simon and Andrew and James and John never fished again.

We know that they did.

They continued to use their talents and skills and gifts and experience,

but they were now using them as Jesus directed.

When Jesus joked with Simon and Andrew that he would make them fishers of people,

he wasn't telling them to go out and hook people and reel them in to be part of a movement,

and he wasn't saying to succeeding generations of Christians,

that they should go out and hook people and reel them in

in order to get more dollars in donations and more people in the pews.

All he was saying was that he would use their gifts for a different purpose now.

The power in this story lies in the disciples' immediate response to Jesus.

When Jesus said repent,

turn your life around, going in an entirely new direction, be totally transformed, they did.

They accepted the invitation. They left their work, their families, and their friends behind.

And when Jesus said believe – meaning trust – and come and follow, they did.

They gave up trying to control their own lives and gave control over to Jesus.

They gave up setting their own direction, and followed after Jesus.

That is the invitation Jesus makes to each and every one of us at some point in our lives,

and sometimes at various points in our lives, and in some ways at every point in our lives.

It's not enough to join a church, or come to worship, or give offerings to a congregation,

or serve on a committee, or serve hungry people, or work for social justice,

because you can do all of those things, and not be following Jesus.

Following Jesus is a personal commitment to be in relationship with Jesus, to spend time with Jesus,

to listen to Jesus, to learn from Jesus, to be willing to give up everything for Jesus,

to follow Jesus, to obey Jesus, to model one's life on Jesus, to love like Jesus.

Following Jesus means loving God with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength,

loving our neighbor as ourselves, loving each other as Jesus has loved us, & loving our enemies.

Following Jesus means opening ourselves to the life-transforming power of the Spirit,

and allowing that Spirit to cultivate in us

the gifts of love and joy, peace and patience, faithfulness, kindness and goodness,

gentleness and generosity, and self-control.

Today Jesus comes with the same message he announced in the beginning,

The time is fulfilled! The kingdom of God is at hand!

Turn your life around and trust in the good news... in me!

Today, Jesus comes with that, same invitation, come and follow.

May each and every one of us decide again this day

to say yes, leave everything else behind, and follow Jesus wherever he leads. Amen