

# Scripture Comments

Mark 1. 14-20

January 22, 2012

The time is fulfilled

Cary G. Speaker, D.Min.

The Gospel According to Mark begins with the introduction of Jesus as the one more powerful than John the Baptist. Jesus is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mk. 1.1-13). Verses 14-15 complete the introduction by connecting Jesus with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. In fact, we discover that the coming of Jesus is a sign of the nearness of the kingdom. It is impossible from word study alone to know whether “has come near” means “here” or “near.” Both meanings are possible. We know from continuing discussion of the kingdom that it is both present and future.

Today our focus is on the call of the first disciples and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The passage we read has two calls. First, Simon and Andrew are called, then James and John. Given Mark’s lean storytelling style, what is missing from the story draws attention to what is present. In other words, it is significant that Mark separates the two calls.

This is probably as good a time as any to point out that there are differences in the Gospel stories. Each version of the Gospel has its own integrity and each Gospel has its own purpose and perspective. We create serious problems when we attempt to homogenize the different stories into one. An example of preserving the integrity of the stories can be seen in our efforts this Christmas to separate the magi from the nativity scene. We celebrated the coming of the magi at Epiphany, their rightful place in the story. The nativity scene, with shepherds and angels is from Luke, but the magi appear in Matthew’s story.

In a scant 13 verses, Mark has described the work of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus and the temptation. Jesus begins his public ministry with the announcement that John has been arrested. Mark writes for an audience that already knows this story. The first image of Jesus that Mark provides is that of preacher. This is the first of Mark’s three favorite images. The other two are teacher and exorcist.

Look at what Mark does include. The call of Jesus comes with authority. Jesus does not appear to be competing with other teachers or charismatic leaders to attract followers. Jesus issues a call that is not refused. The contrast between Jesus’ style and our contemporary consumer style is starkly ironic. Today we think of everything, including faith, as a commodity to be packaged and marketed. Jesus is not participating in our consumer culture.

The second thing we notice about the call of Jesus is that the response to it is without hesitation. If we can step back from the divine, or supernatural, aspect of this story and observe this phenomenon, we might wonder why. Why do the fishermen “immediately” leave their business and follow Jesus? If we think about this through today’s model of changing jobs, we can expect that the fishermen leave for a better job, a promotion or step toward bigger and better things. We already know this story well enough to know that this is not the case. Nothing ever indicates that the disciples receive any reward. To jump ahead (10.35-40), James and John will ask Jesus

about sitting near him in glory and they are sharply rebuked. The only thing that the disciples are promised is persecution and conflict (13.9-13).

We could interpret the thoughts of these first disciples as anticipating the “spiritual” rewards of fishing for people rather than the worldly occupation of catching fish. Again, nothing is recorded in the story that would prepare them to understand and respond to that difference. From the perspective of the fishermen, they are giving up a dependable occupation with a secure market for one that is, at best, ill-defined. Nothing in the story even indicates that the fishermen respond out of faith. They are not described as believing in Jesus or that they understand his mission. During this year of reading Mark, we will discover that the disciples persistently misunderstand Jesus and ultimately disappear when he is finally crucified. Perhaps they have some type of miraculous understanding when they accept Jesus’ call, but sadly, they eventually forget.

Nothing in this story tells us why the fishermen do what they do. We do not know why they leave their nets and the others workers to follow Jesus. All we know is that somehow they are compelled to follow him. They follow a man they do not understand, on a journey that will perplex and confuse them, to a destination as yet unknown. These fishermen-turned-disciples act in faith, but it is not a faith that understands, or takes only calculated risks, or seeks after reward, but rather a faith that responds to a call from outside, a call that will remain unclear and even, at times, frightening.

This is the way the journey of faith begins. This is the way we take the first step in following the ministry of Jesus. Following Jesus does not provide the disciples with answers for their life struggles, but only more questions. Following Jesus does not provide security, but rather rejection and danger. True understanding of Jesus remains concealed, even from the disciples. Nevertheless, potential disciples continue to respond to “follow me.”

At the beginning of these comments I mentioned the ambiguity of timing as it relates to the kingdom of God. Theologians and Biblical scholars have studied and debated this issue for centuries. Today we talk about the kingdom in terms of “realized eschatology.” That means that the kingdom of God is “already” but “not yet.” One of the translation issues in this discussion centers around the two Greek words that become one English word. In Greek there are two words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is the root for our word chronometer. *Chronos* refers to the time that is kept by watches and calendars. *Kairos* is special time or an opportune time. *Kairos* is the time in which the constellation of factors creates an unusually significant moment. This is, as a character in a movie once said, “When all the cosmic tumblers fall into place.”

#### References:

Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*; 1993.  
Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year B, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*; 1993.

