

## **“Immediately!”**

(Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-5,10)

1/21/24

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### **A Rapid fire Gospel**

This morning’s Gospel reading brings us near the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, which is the focus Gospel for 2024 in many churches and in our church also. And we find Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in the Galilee, where he recruits his first disciples.

The Gospel of Mark is written in its own distinctive style. It is much more bare bones and fast moving, than the Gospels of Matthew, Luke or John. Mark is more like shorthand, where Jesus does this and he does that, boom, boom, boom and then on to the next day.

And so you have to be creative and use your imagination more in order to connect one event with the next. Mark forces you to be a bit like a detective trying to fill out the story. And as long as you stick with the basic facts, you can speculate in different ways about what lies behind what has been provided.

And the fast pace of the story is clearly intentional. Because the writer frequently uses words like “immediately” as he does twice in this morning’s Gospel where, when Jesus says to the fishermen: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” we are told that “immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

When you think about these two sentences like a detective (*that Jesus said follow me and I will make you fish for people, and immediately they followed him*) you

will probably say to yourself that Jesus must have said more than that to the fishermen, because nobody just jumps up and gives up everything to follow another person just because they spoke one sentence. Therefore, that one sentence must be the summary of a longer conversation. But whatever he said, taken altogether must have been very powerful, because immediately they left their nets and followed him.

### **A Rather Astounding Claim**

When you think about it, it's a pretty astounding claim that this Gospel is making; that someone, in this case Jesus, would be able to influence others so powerfully that, hearing him speak, they would abandon their lives as they knew it and start on an entirely new life, going off with him into the unknown. Think about it. These are village fishermen who have probably done the same thing every day of their lives.

I find it astounding, because, if you are like me, one of the things you probably notice most about the world is how resistant people are to change and I include myself. When we think about the people in our lives, we think, well that is so and so, he's always been a homebody and will always be a homebody. That's just who he is. Or we think of that other person, who just seems to be angry all the time. And we say to ourselves, "That's who he is, he'll never change." Or we look at ourselves and we notice how fixed we are in our attitudes and behaviors.

I went to my 25<sup>th</sup> high school reunion and had a great time, until I began having the strange feeling that even though everyone looked older, nothing had changed and

everyone was still putting me in the box they had put me in, in high school. And it was a box that I did not care to revisit. Rightly or wrongly, I felt as though I could hear in their voices the same juvenile tendencies and blindspots that I never liked about them in the first place. Don't get me wrong. I still love them. But if there is ever going to be a next time, I'll be looking not to fall into the same dynamics.

I think that, in general, we have a tendency to form impressions about others that become stubbornly resistant to change. We fix others in place in such a way that we don't have to revise our conclusions about them. We see in them only what we expect to see, and this blinds us to the greater potential that they actually have. I think we do that because it is easier. It makes other people a lot less fascinating. But it also makes it easier for us to believe that we understand everything and that we are in control.

But it seems to me that there is a huge down side to thinking this way because, if it is really true that people never change, then nothing we say or do will change those things about them that drive us crazy. Someone who thinks he's smarter than us, will always think he is smarter than us. Someone who bullies or teases us will always bully or tease us. Someone who never shows up when you need them, will never show up when you need them. Someone with whom we have conflicting opinions, will always be in conflict with us.

When you look at it that way, the idea that people can't change is pretty depressing. It reminds me of the definition of insanity, that insanity is "repeating something that doesn't work, over and over again expecting it to work." Why even

bother to have conversations or to seek common ground with each other, if no-one is actually capable of being changed?

### **Rooted in Hatred**

Today's Old Testament Reading from Jonah is itself a study in the inability to accept change. It takes us deep into the emotions that underlie one man's inability to change his own attitudes and his unwillingness to recognize change in others. And the book of Jonah identifies this unwillingness to accept change as something that is rooted in hatred.

After being spit up onto the beach by the "whale", God instructs Jonah to go through the city of Ninevah, calling the Ninevites to repent. Jonah is willing to do God's bidding and he particularly relishes emphasizing to them that, if they are unwilling to repent, God will completely destroy their city. And the fact that he relishes this part of his task is understandable because, for historical reasons, Jonah hates the Ninevites.

To understand why he hates them so much, we have to understand that Ninevah is the capital of the Assyrian Empire that had conquered and destroyed Israel several centuries earlier. And they did so with with tremendous brutality. And so, while Jonah is willing to do God's bidding and warn the Ninevites to repent, he has no interest in their really repenting. Instead, he wants to see them undergo the consequences of failing to repent. He wanted to see them suffer, just as they had made his own people suffer.

Jonah wants to see them suffer so badly that, when the Ninevites repent and God forgives them, he is filled with anger and says the following words:

“Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is why I tried to flee *from you*. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

This is a remarkable statement by Jonah that reveals the depths of his hatred and of his need to punish the Ninevites. His hatred is so strong that it prevents him from even being able to identify with God’s loving purposes. He is not willing to accept the possibility that the Ninevites could change; that they have actually repented and God has chosen to not to destroy them. And he prefers to die than accept it.

### **Soul Searching**

It is a story that takes us into some very dark places in our human psyches. And it prompts us to ask ourselves about whether there is any sense in which our own unwillingness to recognize change for the better in other people and our condemnation of them is rooted in resentment or hatred and the inability to forgive. Is it possible that sometimes we are more focused on the desire to see our perceived enemies punished and destroyed, than on seeing them saved?

There is tremendous resentment in our country today. There are inequalities between regions and social groups. And it seems that for many there is something much more emotionally satisfying about the prospect of seeing their enemies humiliated, than in identifying with a God who’s interest is not in punishment, but in changing hearts and saving souls.

## **Freed by the Good News**

And so, I think that Mark's Gospel is making a wonderful and liberating claim, when Jesus calls his disciples and they respond by following him. The claim is that that there really does exist in this world one who can visit with us, speak to us and change transform everything about who we are and why we are here and what we are doing. When Jesus visits his disciples, their lives are completely transformed and they move in a completely new direction.

This suggests to us that we are also not unchangeable and can become better versions of ourselves. And this must also be true also of those people in our lives that we think of as fixed and unchangeable. They too can change. And if this is so, then the we do not have to think of the problems that plague our world as unchangeable either.

If we believe that there really is a Spirit that has the power to change hearts for the better, then the world and the people around us become more mysterious and unpredictable, but also more interesting and full of potential and the future looks bright and hopeful.