

The Beginning Is Near

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Preaching on:
Mark 1: 14–20

For a long time, I've been wanting to put together a sermon series that would allow me to preach "the fundamentals" of Christianity. Only, I don't want to preach them "by the book." And I don't want to preach them yet to people totally unfamiliar with Christianity. I want to preach on the themes and concepts that most inform my own experience and practice of Christianity, and I want to make my case for why they're core principles to folks who already have their own sense of what Christianity is. And I want to be able to dialogue about it with you. So, all this month I've decided to do a bit of a retrospective on the important themes that have come up in my preaching here at GRCC over the last five years. And I'll try to be direct, whereas before I may have been a little more circumspect.

Now, it may surprise you to learn after hearing the reading this morning that I'm not really going to be talking about calling, or following Jesus, or becoming fishers of people. Those are all important, but to truly understand them you have to first understand what comes just before them. So, allow me to retranslate for you Jesus' inaugural message to the world, his first sermon, so you can hear it again for the first time:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The perfect moment is right now, and the Kingdom of God is breaking through! Change your self and believe in the good news."

This message is the context for what happens to Simon, Andrew, James, and John. This message is what gets under their skin. Or maybe it was already living under their skin, but Jesus comes along, and he activates it. Jesus doesn't tell the disciples the end of the world is coming, he doesn't tell them to feel miserable about their failures and shortcomings, he doesn't tell them to believe in him or his saving death on the cross, or any of that. The time is ripe! Our hope is at hand! Transform yourselves! And believe the good news! That's all Jesus is asking for! No problem!

When we hear the words, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near," our imaginations start straying into the apocalyptic. This is some sort of allusion to the end of the world coming. Earth will end, mad meanie God will take over, the good guys will be raptured off to heaven, and the rest of us will be left behind to suffer and die and then go to hell. It's not our fault that our imaginations go there; our imaginations have been shaped by centuries of interpretation and dogma and orthodoxy. And the unfortunate result is that Jesus arrives literally preaching the good news, and all we can hear is Jesus making some sort of implicit threat of violence or damnation. That threat, I believe, is fundamentally getting in between us and God, fundamentally getting in between the Church and the world. Even if you don't believe the threat, you still hear the threat. And when you hear the threat that you don't believe in, you can't hear the real opportunity Jesus is asking you to participate in.

The joke version of this would be a guy standing in Times Square wearing a sandwich board that says, "The End Is Near!" But I think Jesus' response to that interpretation would be to stand next to that guy with a sign that says, "The Beginning Is Near!" Every transition, every transformation is an ending, but the ending is not the point. The beginning, which is the opportunity overlapping the ending, is the point.

When Simon, Andrew, James, and John left their nets and boats behind, that was a definitive ending. But that is so far from the point. Right? The point is what they will now become. Transform yourselves! “I will make you fishers of people.”

So, now we need to talk about repentance. The Greek word is *metanoia*, which literally means something like, “Change your mind” or “beyond mind.” Most Biblical scholars agree that the word “repentance” is an inadequate substitution. *Metanoia* is focused on this idea of personal transformation, but “to repent” in its origin literally means to feel really bad, to feel intense regret. Now word meanings change over time, but it’s hard to shake that baked in idea—which is so prominent in Christianity—that repentance is about feeling genuinely bad. And so I might imagine that Jesus is asking me, under threat of damnation, to feel really awful about what a miserable sinner I am. And that’s the path to salvation: to die in a state of repentance. Instead, Jesus is asking us to live right now in a state of transformation toward the inbreaking Kingdom of God.

It’s not that this transformation Jesus is asking us to undertake isn’t connected to sinfulness, however you might define that word. It’s not that Jesus doesn’t “believe in” sin, or doesn’t believe it’s important, or even that he doesn’t believe that repentance or transformation shouldn’t be humbling or spiritually intense. So, let’s be clear: Jesus is asking us to transform away from sin and to totally and radically realign ourselves with the values of the Kingdom of God over and above all the powers and kingdoms of this world. That’s so big. That’s so really big. Can’t I just feel bad about something instead?

And I don’t mean to make light of the experience of weeping at your deathbed, and feeling regret, and taking responsibility, and confessing and asking forgiveness, and dying with an unburdened heart. That’s a beautiful and important experience. It’s just not at all what Jesus is talking about and it, honestly, if you think about it, pales in comparison to the monumental ask that Jesus is actually making of us here. The experience of Simon, Andrew, James, and John isn’t meant to be exceptional. Leaving this world behind is meant to be the natural response to Jesus’ message—not a guilty feeling, not a pious rite of forgiveness, a total transformation of your life. There is your life before this moment, and there is your life after this moment, and no one could ever mistake the one for the other.

OK. So, what does that transformation look like, exactly? I get that this is the moment for change. I get that I’m being asked to realign myself and my values with the Kingdom of God. What does that look like exactly? Well, we’re going to have to wait until next week to talk about that, when I’ll be preaching on the next two fundamentals, love and justice.

In the meantime, carry Jesus’ first sermon in your heart this week and let it work on you: “The perfect moment is right now, and the Kingdom of God is breaking through! Change yourself and believe in the good news.” And ask yourself: Why is right now the perfect moment? Where and how is the Kingdom of God breaking through? What needs to change in my life? What am I becoming? And remember: The Beginning Is Near!