

Epiphany 3B 2021 Mark 1:14-20

The Holy Spirit saw fit to inspire four gospel writers whom the early church would consider the authorities on the story of Jesus' life. Although Mark is the second book of our New Testament, it was written first and is by far the shortest. We can see places where Matthew and Luke fleshed out the stories that Mark told; and John's poetic language and lofty themes are the opposite of Mark's straightforward, only-the-facts-ma'am approach. So when Mark gives us details, even little ones, we are meant to pay attention. For Mark, it is significant that Jesus begins his public ministry directly after John is arrested.

Remember the other stories we hear about John: John preached a baptism of repentance—a commitment to change perspective and begin living in accordance with a new vision of life. People from all over the Judean countryside as well as big city Jerusalem flocked to the wilderness to hear his message. The scribes and Pharisees also came to see John, but he rebuked them for their insincerity—they had no plans to change their views or live differently; things were going pretty well for them, so they didn't see any need for change. In addition to the religious leaders, John criticized King Herod for divorcing his wife, which started a small war that he lost, and re-marrying his cousin who, at the time, may have still been married to his half-brother—all just another Tuesday in the soap opera that was the Herodian dynasty, but also a violation of the law. It was for speaking truth to power that John was arrested; later, it was not so much Herod's personal ill-will toward John, but Herod's carelessness and pride for which John was eventually beheaded.

Since most of us are not hearing the gospel story for the first time, we recognize that Jesus' fate was going to be similar to John's. Jesus would call disciples and amass a following, especially among ordinary people. He would anger the religious leaders by preaching a truth that could not help but expose their hypocrisy. In the end, he would be arrested without having committed any crime, and the political leaders would fail to use their power to prevent his execution, even though they admitted to having no legitimate reason to put him to death. John, who was once the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, prefigured Jesus' life and death more completely than he could have known.

I had once thought that Mark began the story of Jesus' public ministry in the same sentence that informs of us of John's arrest in order to tell us that Jesus bravely moved forward in spite of knowing the potential dangers—that if they could arrest John for doing nothing more than telling the truth, then they could arrest Jesus as well. But it might be more accurate to say that Jesus began his ministry—teaching, preaching, healing, forgiving, and freeing especially the poor, hungry, ill, disabled, and sinful—not in spite of what happened to John, but because of that injustice. And not just what happened to John but what had always happened, what still

happens, and what probably always will happen when someone shows how the kingdom of God stands opposed to the kingdoms of humanity. The call to live a changed life, and by doing so, to change the world, is a word of good news and hope to those who suffer, but a threat to those who would continue to benefit from things staying the same. Rarely do those in power share it willingly. Jesus knew this and showed us a better way.

Mark leads us to believe that Jesus does know full well what is at stake when he chooses to live out his calling as God's Son. As the story continues, we may wonder if his disciples have such keen insight as to what they are getting themselves into when they choose to follow him, but Mark hints that they may: Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, and immediately they follow him—beginning an entirely new life of fishing for people instead of for tilapia. For James and John the stakes are even higher—they leave not just their job but their father to follow Jesus. Deserting their father means more than we might think of a modern day craftsman opting out of the family business: James and John had a moral, social responsibility to provide for Zebedee in his old age by learning and maintaining his trade. They abandon their family obligation as well as their livelihood to follow this itinerant preacher around the countryside—going farther from home and everything they know than they have ever been before.

Our Christian calling places different demands on us than on Jesus' first disciples. A few of us clergy are called to make a profession out of spreading the good news, but mostly God's call is to live as disciples within our other vocations—as teachers, farmers, accountants, nurses, and electricians. Rarely does Jesus call us away from our families; mostly we live as disciples within our roles as children, siblings, cousins, spouses, parents, or friends. Yet Jesus' words still call us to repent and believe in the good news that the kingdom of God has come near. We are still called to believe that God's kingdom ideals of justice, humility, love, mercy, and service are how we are supposed to live in a world where pride, hatred, vengeance, greed, and exploitation still cause suffering and even death. We are still called to a way of life that is going to cause conflict on the way to true peace—because like the scribes and Pharisees and the Herod's and Pilate's who clashed with John and Jesus, there are still and will always be those who are unwilling to work for the good of the whole community if it means any kind of sacrifice or even inconvenience on their part. We may not find ourselves imprisoned for telling the truth, as John and Jesus were, but as disciples, we can expect to find ourselves at odds with the world, because the world is at odds with God. God calls us to make the broken world around us look more like the kingdom of wholeness and healing that came near when Jesus showed us a better way. May we respond with the same immediacy as Simon, Andrew, James, and John—leaving whatever would keep us from following Jesus' way.