

3rd Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon 1.21.24

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And **immediately** they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. **Immediately** he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (131)

When I need to concentrate, I go to church. But not just any church. I go to the meetinghouse of the Church on the Hill. I've even set up a couple cozy nooks there, of the sort I need to get to thinking. Because, see, our meetinghouse: it's one of the few places in my life where I can't get Wi-Fi. And once Wi-Fi is an option, concentrated attention hardly is.

Our attention isn't what is used to be. The Internet, social media: they've changed our attention. Lots of people are saying that. Google it and you'll see. You'll see so many articles, books, and otherwise studies of the problem that you won't know which to choose and focus on. And isn't *that* ironic?

To save you the mental assault of it all, I'll choose one for you. Johann Hari published a short piece in *The Guardian* just over two years ago, a digest of his longer piece, a book entitled, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention*. His argument is summed up thus: "Your attention didn't collapse. It was stolen. Social media and many other facets of modern life are destroying our ability to concentrate. We need to reclaim our minds while we still can."

But if all this sounds like a concern very much of the current moment, let me tell you that the condition of your mind has long been a concern, was indeed even an ancient concern. The condition of your mind, and the fact that you *pay* attention to something, similar to how you might pay money to something thus lending it value: this has been a concern indeed since the ancient of days, and even to the one whom we call the Ancient of Days: what are you paying your precious attention to? How is your mind?

Mark's gospel might seem the least spiritual of the four we have—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Mark's gospel moves quickly. The writer of it uses few words, doesn't expound or explain. The narrative bears the quality of someone just barely keeping up. Jesus is on the move. Jesus is active, and activating, and ours is simply to go after, to go swiftly after, as swiftly as we can.

By contrast, in the Gospel of John, there's a ponderous quality: even the words chosen to tell it all operate on several planes of meaning. In the Gospel of Luke, the Holy Spirit is really the main character, the one whose movement is primary, the movement of the Holy Spirit the spur to all other action. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus as a teacher bears forth a spiritual quality. In the Gospel of Mark, though, there's a tight series of actions. Jesus *acts* in this telling—which doesn't always evoke the spiritual. Really, action and the spiritual can seem nearly opposites.

Which is wrong, I realize: they're not opposites. And yet, action and contemplation, activism and spirituality: so often it seems that a contemplative faith is thought to eschew activism in the world, and faith that is activist seems to disregard contemplation as have any "real" effect.

I know that's true in the UCC. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, can come across as believing much more in the power of well-meaning people than in the power of God. Really our faith can seem so much a matter of *doing* that the one in whose service we might do it seems like an afterthought. I remember hearing someone who'd overheard a criticism from the pews of a UCC preacher. "I know what you want me to do," this poor parishioner muttered. "I know what you'd like to do. I'd like to know a little more about the God in whose name I should do it."

To correct for this progressive-faith, "We can do it!" tendency, there's a school headed up by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar. Situated in New Mexico, it is the Center for Action and Contemplation. They release a daily email meditation I know some of you receive, and they include among their teachers Cynthia Bourgeault, who wrote the next book our churches' book club will read together, *The Wisdom Jesus*. (I am *very* curious about how we will receive this.) As for the Center of Action and Contemplation, it's said among the teachers there that the most important word in their school's name is "and," the "and" of Center for Action *and* Contemplation. The two *are* interconnected.

The writer of the Gospel According to Mark would likely agree. Contemplation is an attuning to the Spirit by which there is any action at all. Contemplation is the action of right attention by which all other action in this dynamic creation is even possible. To get your mind right, to attune your attention rightly: this is the first of any important action.

Consider Jesus' first words according to Mark. They are words that intertwine these modes. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." "Repent," is indeed an action that is all about the condition of the mind.

You think otherwise, I know. Even though I tell you all the time, whenever the notion of repentance comes up in the lectionary, which is often, you still revert to your thinking that repentance is really just owning how bad you are, confessing your sins or admitting all your failings or coming clean about all the sully things about you.

But no, repentance is, in Greek, *metanoia*, which is a coming together of two things, *-noia*, which means knowledge, and *meta-* which means beyond or above or before or beneath. Just so, Cynthia Bourgeault, our writer in book club for the next several weeks, points out that *metanoia* means to “go beyond the mind,” or to “go into the large mind.” What I’ve said in the past is that *metanoia* is to know as God knows, which indeed is to know God. And this might, of course, include some recognition of all the ways you’ve fallen short, all the ways you’ve participated in sin. It is moreover, though, akin to what Paul, the apostle, wrote of elsewhere, that repentance is to put on the mind of Christ.

And please notice that John the baptizer also urged repentance according to the Gospel of Mark. Mentioned just a few verses earlier, John offered a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. But he also foretold someone greater than him coming, someone who wouldn’t just baptize with water but would baptize with the Holy Spirit and who, turns out, includes in his notion of repentance not just the forgiveness of sin but moreover that the kingdom of God has come near. Yes, turns out, to this one who is yet to come, who is greater even than John was in his baptism, repentance—that is, *metanoia*, that is, going into the large mind—is all about good news.

Interesting that the story notes: Jesus came to Galilee declaring all this once John had been arrested. It’s as if John’s arrest triggered Jesus to this new action, as if Jesus was taking up the baton left dropped by John’s arrest.

Interesting moreover that somehow, in all this, time had come fulfilled. Chronological time had become full with a different quality of time, *kairos* time, a fullness of time, as if all time were now, the kingdom of heaven having come near.

I wonder if it had come near, in the utter presence of Jesus, in that moment when, at his baptism by John, the Holy Spirit came down on him like a dove when also a voice from heaven came, saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Surely, it’s this utter presence—of all time and even eternity, of all being into one being—that has Simon and Andrew, and James and John drop their nets to follow Jesus. Jesus hasn’t convinced them of anything here. He hasn’t persuaded them that a better use of their lives would

be to follow him. He doesn't have a proposal or an argument or a plan for them. There's just his arrival in their midst and his speaking: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

Much has been made, of course, of his wording here. Much has been made of what metaphor Jesus uses here. What does it mean to fish for people? Are we even okay with people being equated to fish? Are you okay with having your heart of faith be cast as if you were caught up in a net? Does that make coming to church akin to a fish flopping hapless on a dock?

If you ask me, too much has been made of this metaphor. Jesus doesn't say this ("Follow me and I will make you fish for people.") to everyone who might come to follow him. He says this to fishermen, which the story is keen to remind us they were. Andrew and Simon, James and John: they were fishermen, which reminder makes it clear Jesus was using an idiom these four might have appreciated, without really overthinking it. They'd be gathering people. In joining up with Jesus, they'd be gathering people into a web of relationships by which mutual service and care might build up a beloved community.

But more than the verbal appeal is the appeal of what presence Jesus seems to embody, what charisma, the charism being the Holy Spirit come down at his baptism. This is why Mark notes things so often happening "immediately"—which he does eleven times, "immediately," in this first chapter alone. Something is immediate if it has no mediation, no mode or medium by which it is transmitted. Just so, according to Mark, there is about Jesus immediate presence, neither interpreted nor mediated nor explicated or excused. He shows up and there it is: immediate presence of something divine, something of *kairos*, the all-in-all. All you have to do is attend to it. Pay attention to it. Pay your precious attention to it.

I sometimes think that church leaders don't really trust their parishioners with their own thoughts. I see this in much of how we go about leading worship, especially in churches that aren't highly liturgical, which is to say church like ours. So much of how we pastors plan and lead worship suggests that we don't really trust our parishioners with their own thoughts. We prize novelty. We strive for ingenuity and to incorporate the latest technology and always to have something going on. We strive for all this more than we seem to yearn for time together for more careful, mindful attending.

But ours, if you ask me, is to create a form into which people like you can enter where together we condition our minds to perceive better the reality, presence, immediacy of God.

One more way a church sanctuary can be a sanctuary, shelter and protection from the storms of the world, which storms arrive to our devices and then to our being.

Do you ever end the day with a tired brain? A day where there have been so many points of entry for so much you've got to do that it has felt like assault and it has left your brain tattered?

Studies show sleep actually washes the brain. The biochemicals that become active while you sleep have the effect of washing your brain.

I like to think of coming to church, of being in worship, as having similar effect for the mind, for the soul. Cleansed of something not so much dirty as distracting.

Repent, here attune to the more majestic mind.

Take a moment, the doorway to eternity.

Thanks be to God.