

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany  
Sermon 1.24.21

**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)

Last Saturday, Jesse came home from being vaccinated. The first round of the two-shot process, it had him at the W.E.B. DuBois Middle School in Great Barrington with about 600 other people. More to the point, all of Gould Farm was there, which is why he qualified for this early phase of distribution. As the prescriber there, he's a member of that community-based care site. This means all his people were there, people he's known and worked closely with once a week for the last fifteen years, people who became virtual in April and whose presence he hasn't felt since.

When he returned home, he came into the living room where I was sitting. He was still wearing all that presence, all that energy. It clung to him and shed off him like cold on the dogs when they come inside. His cheeks were flushed. "I feel like I've just had a hundred shots of straight dopamine," he said. Of course, he couldn't touch any of these many people, couldn't hug any of them. They had to stay six feet away from each other and had to be masked—this though while they jumped up and down at the sight of one another.

People and their presence: it's powerful. It's mysterious.

Last time I preached on Jesus' call to the disciples was this Sunday last year. I looked back on the sermon as I often do, looking back to the last time I preached on the thing I'm to preach on next. Last year's sermon was all about presence, all about how our living so much of our lives on-line was uncoupling us from the real, which makes us vulnerable to manipulation.

It's worth remembering that Fascism arose with early technology that could span distances. Mussolini and his loudspeaker. Hitler on the radio. A politics of appearances has a new opportunity with these sorts of technologies that both isolate and connect.

As for Jesus' call of the disciples, which was as unmediated a thing as can be imagined, I preached on it just last year because we hear about it every year, it being remembered in all four gospels. It's in the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), one of which we follow each year of the three-year calendar. It's also in the gospel of John, which is less a synopsis of Jesus' life and ministry, is more about the nature of Christ than the doings of Jesus, and so doesn't get its own church year, is instead dropped into the three year cycle every few Sundays. This is to say we have an annual opportunity to remember Jesus gathering his disciples, annual and then some.

Last time I preached on this it was Matthew's year, and I focused on presence, and I snarked against our lives on the internet—the internet, which promises to obliterate all distance between us. Anyone on the internet can connect with anyone else on the internet anywhere in the world. Last year I snarked against it. This year, of course, it's a saving grace.

Powerful things are that way—full of promise, full of peril.

I could preach that sermon doubled down this year were it not for COVID, because Mark's Jesus is all the more immediate, all the more in contradiction to anything mediated. Immediately felt, immediate in effect: watch Jesus according to Mark. Watch him arrive in a place and have influence, as immediate as our own shadows are cast when we step into the light. Jesus' effect isn't something he tries to do, it's something that he'd need to try not to do. And this means, insofar as our lives are mediated by the sort of medium that the internet excels at being, beyond all other iterations of media to come before, we're going to be missing something essential about Jesus in the world. Insofar as we live mediated lives, lives on-line, more connected and more isolated than ever before as a species in the world, we're going to miss something essential about our own discipleship.

This was the irony of Mark writing this gospel narrative: he was committing to early media technology something that he swore by its essence couldn't be mediated. But what choice did he have, lest the story run the risk of being lost to history?

So, be it. He would write it down.

Mark tells us it was an immediacy about Jesus that turned those first disciples from their fishing nets to following Jesus. Mark *shows* us that it wasn't persuasion or argument that got them to follow—a new teaching, with authority! And it wasn't that Jesus had done something impressive to attract their attention—a miracle, a healing. Rest assured, we'll get to these, next week in fact,

both a new teaching, and with authority, and a miraculous healing. For now, though, it's just this, Jesus arriving in Galilee, arriving at the shore, his presence, his utter and absolute presence and its perfect appeal. "Follow me."

This arrival, you might have noticed, was preceded by another event, John's arrest, though it doesn't obviously lead one to the next. But consider this: John had been the herald of Jesus, the one to go ahead of Jesus to prepare the way for him. This is both how John understood himself, and how scripture cast him over and over again. Jesus' cousin, just a few months older, though a whole lot weirder, John was the son of a Temple prophet, which is to say a man of the establishment. John, though, rejected his father's role in the hegemon, went far outside the line of expectation, put on a hairshirt, sustained himself on locusts and wild honey, and made his work in the wilderness. This is someone who was not going to fit in, who was not going to go along to get along.

It would get him arrested.

It would get him killed—though that hadn't happened yet.

For now, his arrest seems to have felt momentous to Jesus, a trigger for some new phase of his life and work. For it, he would now take the lead. The one who had been out front was now gone. It came to Jesus to take make his own way. He was ready. Baptized. Tested.

Mark's gospel does a lot with the proper ordering of things when it comes to Jesus. In Mark, we hear a lot about Jesus and how he's positioned as regards the disciples and the crowds. He is to be in front, and when that ordering gets disordered, it's bad, it's wrong.

When John was eventually executed, killed by Herod, Jesus is remembered as having a crowd come out to him in a faraway place, they apparently as disturbed to hear of John's death as Jesus was. They came to him, out where he had withdrawn to pray, and, as it became late, Jesus and the disciples realized those in the crowd were growing hungry though had little to eat. So, Jesus fed them, fed them to full with but five loaves of bread and two fish. And then he sent them home, and he sent his disciples on ahead so he could stay behind to pray, sent them ahead in a boat across the sea. But a storm came up and the disciples were frightened in their small boat on the rough sea. So, Jesus went to them, walking across the water, calming the sea, and he took his place out front once again. This set things to right.

When Jesus told of his coming passion, saying to the disciples James and Peter and John that he must undergo great suffering and be killed, and on the third day rise again, and Peter said, “No, God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you,” Jesus replied in saying, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me, setting your mind on human things rather than on divine things.” Peter had wanted Jesus to follow in his way, which was a good way if you ask me. I’m not thrilled about Jesus being crucified either. Jesus knew Peter was to follow in his way, even though it would lead to the cross. “Get behind me.”

We must be careful whom we imitate. We must be careful about who we let dictate the terms of our living. It must be Christ. It must simply and always be Christ, whose way though leads to the cross.

For a while now, it’s been the proper ordering of things, that John would go first and Jesus would come next, that John would go ahead and prepare a way for Jesus, and Jesus would arrive where John had been. And now John had been arrested, as Jesus would one day be, no thanks to his ministry. He wasn’t to shy away from this. We wasn’t to work to avoid this. So, now Jesus arrived, come to Galilee, to proclaim something akin to what John had proclaimed, a thing once anticipated now fulfilled: “The proper time has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn near; repent, change your hearts and have faith in the good tidings.”

That the Kingdom of God has come near: this is the central point of Mark’s gospel. That in Jesus the Kingdom of God has come near. And it’s not a great rendering, the Greek to the English, because a kingdom is a state whereas what’s indicated here is a dynamic. What Jesus makes present by his immediate presence is an occurrence, an event. It happens most truly in Jesus. It happens most fully in Jesus.

I have to admit I sometimes don’t know what to with all this. Mark’s conviction about Jesus—I literally don’t know what to do in response. At least in Matthew, we get some content of his teaching. The Sermon on the Mount at least gives us a notion of what we’re to do. Those things are hard, maybe even impossible. But it gives us something to try at. At least in Luke, we get the same, the Sermon on the Plain giving a sense of what discipleship is to be about. But in Mark, we meet Jesus as so singular a figure that our not being Jesus is especially problematic.

Some would obscure this—the singularity of Jesus. One prominent scholar of the Gospel of Mark, Ched Myers, claims this gospel is a call to discipleship, and then he points out all the many

times Jesus has powerful, undeniable effect on the dark forces that occupy this world. Because according to Mark, this world is an occupied territory. Like Jerusalem was at the time of this gospel's writing, so this world is: occupied by an enemy force, and ruling it with violence, fear, and profligate death.

And it's hard to deny that professed fact of the world. It's hard to deny that something here is very wrong. If God is good, and God is our creator, then something amidst creation is yet very wrong. "There's something deeply wrong," wrote poet James McAuley, in his poem "In the Twentieth Century. "There's something deeply wrong, either with us or with you. Our bright, loud world is strong, and better in some ways than the old haunting kingdoms..." So, on this, I agree with Myers.

But, his commentary is heavy on the "should." His claim that this is a gospel all about discipleship puts him in the position of setting some pretty heavy demands on us regarding all we're to do about all that is very wrong. If Jesus isn't singular in his effect, which Mark's gospel seems to insist he is, but which Myers seems to elide, then a lot falls to us to take care of, and it's really, really more than I can take.

It's why I decided against Myer's commentary on the Gospel of Mark for our book group. Colleagues warned me against it for other reasons. "It's way too radical," some said. "It will freak people out." Jesus according to Mark is no friend of most of the things that animate Americans. As I read it, I figured we could all handle it. The rejection of wealth as good in and of itself, the rejection of militarism as good in any way at all, the rejection of power as it gets exercised in the world as good: I figured we could handle that. That understanding of Jesus wouldn't come as a great shock. What we couldn't handle, or what I couldn't handle in my reading of the book, was the overbearing heaviness of what's expected of us. *We're* to undo the powers and principalities. *We're* to undo militarism and exploitative consumerism. If we want to be close with Jesus, then it falls to us to do all this.

But never in the history of the world has any people manage to undo all this—which suggests perhaps it is beyond our ken to do all this. It's not for nothing that we pray on Maundy Thursday, the day before the crucifixion, that we are mired in sin too heavy for us to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo—which is to say we rely on a savior who is something other than us.

I sat in my chair as winter closed in and COVID still demanded we keep our distance from one another with Myer's book in my hand, and I felt increasingly cut off from the spirit, cut off from God and far from the savior who is our only and best hope.

This isn't what a church book club should leave anyone feeling, especially not the pastor. And it is the very opposite of what Mark intended in his writing this.

My friend and colleague Bert Marshall, who memorized this gospel narrative and who performs it live, which we of the Monterey and Lenox congregations hired him to do for us last spring, which we then had to cancel him doing so for us last spring, the first thing in my life to have been canceled due to COVID, doesn't agree with Myers on his central claim either. He doesn't think this is a gospel about discipleship. I never got around to asking what he thinks it is about. But his having made it so he can *present* this gospel, *present it live*, suggests to me he thinks it's about presence, live presence.

There's also this, that in this gospel, the disciples are especially off the mark almost all the time, and in this gospel, Jesus is especially obtuse almost all the time. Not as weird as John, he yet doesn't fit in. He doesn't conform. He doesn't meet us where we are or smooth out his rough edges or attempt to make himself intelligible. He seems, on the contrary, sometimes to make himself unintelligible. Instead, always, he shows up, ill-fitting to what structures we've built, unconforming to what we've come to expect as good, and in showing up he changes everything, transforms everything, and asks mainly that we trust and we follow. "Follow me," he said, which might be just as rightly rendered, "Come after me." We're to follow. We're to chase, a game of tag that in our losing we yet win. We imitate what he has done, which is simply to present, simply to be present in the Spirit with one another.

I've heard it supposed that, when the quarantine lifts and we're all free to go out and about, we're going to find it utterly overwhelming; some might anyway. I've heard it supposed that some people might find the presence of others so stimulating that it will almost feel disturbing.

I can believe it.

I might even be it. Even before quarantine, it would take me several days to recover from any big stimulating event. I'm an introvert. I'm actually sort of a baby.

If this is the case, this stimulating disturbance widely felt, it will at least give us a sense of what Simon and Andrew, James and John first sensed about Jesus, his utter, even disturbing, presence.

Meanwhile, we wait out the quarantine, while this, our mediated existence, might also give us a sense of what we're hoping for, what we truly rely on. An arrival, an occurrence that holds us in what is real, what is true. A reigning, pouring forth that fills us, a ballast of actual being.

Without this, we're ever more vulnerable to the manipulations of appearances.

It will come as no surprise to learn that I am relieved Donald Trump is out of office. It is something of a surprise to me that I'm even more relieved he's off Twitter—the place from which his generating of power was truly dangerous for its being unaccountable to anything, for its being wholly uncoupled from the real and the true.

But even with these empty appearances of power removed from us, like when shades go up, and the windows let in light, and the slideshow cast on the wall is no longer all we can see or anything we can see, we are still vulnerable to mediated existence that can generate deception and make us crazed, make of us a mob. We are still removed from the way of presence that makes it so we're accountable to what's real, we're accountable to what's true, we're accountable to one another in all our fleshly and full humanity—and insofar as this is the current mission of the church, which I think it is, to counter our dangerous politics of appearances with a grounding and enfleshing a politics of love, then the church has been drained of its power to transform, given that we cannot fully gather as church, the mystical body of Christ manifest.

But the days are surely coming when we can—and we will know anew the power of that for our having been denied it this long.

I miss you. I miss your bodies. I miss the sounds and smells and mystical effect they have when we are close, when we can hold hands or touch arms or embrace. I miss us, by which is played out our transformative power.

But the days are surely coming.

Thanks be to God.