

1/22/2012, Bread, Bath and Beyond:

Beyond Horizons

Occupying the Gospel, Mark 1:14-20
preached by Kelly D. Turney at ELUMC

*But with the delivering over of John, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “**The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Turn, change your life, trust radically and live [‘faith’] in the good news.**”*

*And moving alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “**Come after me and I will make you to be fishers of people.**” And immediately, letting go the nets, they followed him. And stepping a little forward, he saw James son of Zebedee and John his brother in the boat restoring the nets. Immediately, he called them and, letting go their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired hands, they went after him.*

In Morocco, Abdullah Abaakil, tells the reporter that he has a new identity after participating in the pro-democracy protest last winter. He was a business executive when he joined the protest on Feb 20 to demand limits to the power of the King. And sure enough within weeks, the King proposed a new constitution and elections but the political and economic systems have to been slow to change, Abdullah says, and they still favor injustice and poverty. So now, almost a year later, he is a full-time democracy activist in Casablanca. He says he quit his job and organizes weekly protests to keep up the pressure on the government, because “what you get in staying silent is worse than what you get shouting in the street.”¹

It was his voice I heard when I read the story of the disciples dropping their nets and following Jesus— this executive willing to leave behind a good job and take on a new identity because he felt called to make his country better. Without that radio report on Friday about Abdullah, I would’ve sworn that this kind of thing, leaving behind who you are, dropping everything to make a radical change, it just doesn’t happen these days, even for a good reason like a chance to change the world, a job offer, a marriage proposal, or an invitation by a former carpenter and itinerant preacher to be the kingdom of God.

It just doesn’t happen all of sudden like that, even if the gospel writer Mark wants us to believe it. We’re just thirteen verses into his version of the good news and already he’s introduced John the Baptist, told of the baptism of Jesus with the voice from heaven proclaiming him “beloved,” and in only one verse told of his subsequent temptation in the wilderness. Today’s lectionary lesson begins with the “delivering over” of John the Baptist—using the same verb seen later to describe the arrest of Jesus, so we’re not even half-way through the first chapter and already “a shadow hangs over the story—the shadow of institutional violence.”²

We don’t know any of the details of Jesus calling these fishermen away from their nets, Mark doesn’t think we need to know them... all we know is that Jesus was offering them a change in their identity. He wasn’t asking them to add “discipleship” as one more thing on their already full “to do” list. He wasn’t saying perform one more task for me: first fish for fish, then for men. No, he offered them a new way of being in the world— a world whose political realities may echo in our own if we pay attention to the sparse details Mark offers.

Repeatedly, the gospel writer emphasizes we’re in Galilee, which was a multi-cultural town with a significant gentile population coming from Greek and Roman settlements following their respective conquests. The vast majority of the indigenous, native population was poor—with agriculture and fishing the main forms of livelihood. Unlike the larger, more prestigious, more insulated and conservative Jerusalem, Galilee was on a trade route and so was exposed to various foreign influences through traders moving through the region. “All these influences—poverty, alienation, exposure to ‘new ideas’ may have contributed to a Galilean ‘rebellious streak.’”³ So the Jesus movement first begins among the poor, estranged and rebellious Galileans.

“In any great work of literature, the first words of the main character have special weight.” In Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ first sentence is: “**God’s time has been fulfilled.**” Peterson puts it this way: “**Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.**” The grammar tells us that Jesus is talking to the community, to the people as a collective body more than telling individuals they need to change. And the “turning,” or “repenting” he’s referring to is not a feeling of remorse—it’s not an emotion he’s asking for, but an action – of moving in a new direction. The next phrase, which often gets translated “believe” in the good news, isn’t about theological agreement, he wants followers to trust God’s way with all of who they are.

Perhaps the hardest thing for us to get right in the translation of the sentence is the phrase “good news” which we may think of as a religious word with evangelism connotations. But in Mark’s time, it was more frequently used to “refer to the great acts of Caesar.” As in: “*Good news! Caesar is victorious in Gaul!*” So Mark is making the point that good news should have nothing to do with the government power (often considered divine in that time period), and everything to do with Jesus.

Likewise, we may think of Simon and Andrew, on a boat, engaged in a free-enterprise system, a family business working for themselves. But the Sea of Galilee belonged to Caesar, and the fishing economy was controlled by the government. So Jesus seeks his first base of support in a livelihood and a fishing economy that’s in a state of unrest.

He invites people engaged and invested in this market economy system into a new way of being, into a relational understanding of economy— into being a people with a new understanding of being related and invested in each other. And being fishers of people has “nothing to do with today’s popular notion of evangelism” where you try “to hook people into Christianity so they can be saved according to our definitions. Rather, Jesus is telling these fishermen that he has more important things for them to do than participate in the current, and corrupt, market system.”⁴

In response to Jesus’ call, Mark says Andrew and Simon turned from what they had known and became part of a new community who would derive their identity “not from their present economic condition or their past familial relationships, but rather be given a new identity as followers of the way of the kingdom of God.”⁵

Others too, would join them and they would seed communities in town after town. They would claim no place as their home but they would occupy the places where people were complacent, where folks had grown accustomed to the current market system, offering them hope for a new way—a kingdom of God that was beyond their current horizon and yet Jesus claimed was already being fulfilled. We don’t know if this band of rebels ever offered a specific piece of legislation, or an alternative political solution but they tried to find a way to live into the kingdom of God, rather than the kingdom of Caesar, by sharing resources, and by naming the wickedness of making the current empire, or political system or market economy their God. They cast a vision of a way that championed the poor rather

than scape-goated them. They advocated for a system that gave power to the lowly and justice to all.

It grew beyond fishermen, to include others who were outcasts and even some business executives would find an identity there. Yet, they would remain rag-tag group on the margins, threatening those in power, challenging the local establishment, annoying those who had made their peace with the current system. No doubt they were called uncivilized, unpatriotic, even heretical. Perhaps some critics argued for more constructive ways to make change— methods that didn’t require a large mob to camp out on public squares. Surely, someone wrote an editorial saying they should work within the temple system, while continuing to pay homage to Caesar. No doubt those gathered for services questioned why the rebels insisted on stirring up civil unrest. After all, how dare Jesus suggest that the demands of their faith could not be satisfied one day a week in the temple. It was risky to believe one’s faith might have implications for governance or for the economic system. And it was downright dangerous to imagine that the current political leader was anything other than divine.

John the Baptist had already been arrested, they could see where this kind of action would lead. Even Judas would later try a scheme to keep their leader from being put to death. But against all odds, Mark says this group would continue to proclaim the good news and offer a new vision beyond the horizon, because if you believe in the kingdom of God, if you put your trust radically in this way, then it has implications for how you spend your money, how you involved in the political process, how you live in community, how you protest when your government gets it wrong.

And it may not be pretty, or efficient, or perhaps even that effective, after all, the followers of Jesus, the people-of-the-way, have been forming and re-forming community over 2,000 years now, under every imaginable type of government and market economy, and we’re still trying to figure out what it means to trust radically and live into the kingdom of God.

1. From “*For Moroccan Activists, The King’s Reforms Fall Short*” heard on Morning Edition, Deborah Amos reporting, January 20, 2012.

2, 3, 4, 5. From Lectionary blogging on Progressive Involvement by John Petty found at www.textweek.com