

**January 24, 2021**

*Jonah 3: 1-5, 10*

*Mark 1: 14-20*

***Walking Each Other Home***  
***The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding***

*The month of January, and the season of Epiphany that's embedded in it, always brings us a fresh opportunity to watch Jesus starting things: convening a community, building a movement. Every year this seems particularly well-tuned to the run-up to our Annual Meeting – that moment in the wise circle of the year [next week] when we take a good look at the community Jesus has convened here, and the movement that we're trying to build in his name and in his company. This week there's a nice extra bit of resonance in the story of the inauguration of Jesus's ministry as it appears in the Gospel of Mark – a resonance which also helps us to celebrate the baptism today of Jack Sawtell, who has his own special connection to Jesus already by virtue of having played him on Christmas Eve during our stroll-through of the sanctuary. So in Jack's honor – and for another reason too – I'm going to start reading at the beginning so you can hear the very first words Mark wrote – and hold the story of Jesus's own baptism alongside the story of the start of his movement:*

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."*

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

*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 sea—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.*

Most scholars believe that Mark's gospel is the earliest narrative we have of Jesus's life. If that's true it means that, in the passage you just heard from chapter one, you were also hearing the very first recorded words of Jesus on the stage of history. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news." Those eighteen words are really what all our prayers and mission projects and budgets and staff and bricks and mortar are all about, what Jack's baptism is about, what our friendships with each other are about, and maybe our arguments and hard decisions too. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news."

In pondering these first words, three particular questions have tugged at me: What does it mean to say that the time is "fulfilled"? What does it mean to say that the kingdom has drawn near? What causes the fishers to follow?

First: what makes the time "fulfilled"?

The other reason, besides Jack's baptism, that I wanted you to hear all of Mark's opening verses is because it matters that Jesus takes his walk on the shore of the Sea of Galilee at a very particular time: "after John was arrested." The first thing to notice about Jesus's first words is that they are basically John the Baptist's words – spoken with perhaps heightened urgency. Evidently all it took to get King Herod to arrest John was his urging people to wake up and change their lives, and to believe that someone would be coming who would fashion a community around that call to transformation – a community of open, humble hearts; a community built around a new way of living. But Herod and the Empire he served evidently liked the old way of living just fine – because it left them holding the kind of power that insures that nothing can change. Jesus stepped into the shadow cast by John's arrest to wield a kind of power that, if people take it to heart, changes just about everything. Jesus stepped into the hole created by the elimination of the prophet, and filled that space to overflowing. With his first public breath he announced that the struggle between the power of suppression and the power of transformation had been joined. The time is *fulfilled*, he said – and that's such a full word: the time is ready, the time is fresh, the time is now. We used to think that the time was coming, maybe. No. The time is *ripe*, Jesus says. The time is *here*.

Next: what does it mean to say that "the kingdom of God has drawn near"?

The word "kingdom" in the Greek is less governmental than it sounds – less about an institution, more about a spirit. "Realm" works, sort of: "the realm of God," something continuous and organic... But when I worked at Williams College I was lucky enough to spend this month every year with students in Nicaragua – and our friends there like to talk about "the reign of God" as though it's an old friend – *el Reino*, they call it – something that's close enough that they can feel it, know it, almost taste it. Their liberationist faith teaches them to see the fulfillment of God's bright design for creation, not as some remote conclusion to the human adventure, but as something we're all working on together, something that's alive here and right now. "Building the reign of God," they like to say about what they do more or less every day. So its "near-ness" is exactly the point – its most vivid quality, in fact. There's an already-ness to it; as one commentator says, the realm of God is not the product of discipleship, it's the precondition.<sup>1</sup> For Jesus to say that the time of God's reign is only as far away as

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<sup>1</sup> Ted A. Smith (Homiletical Perspective) in Feasting on the Word [Yr B, vol 1] (Louisville: Westminster/John Know, 2008), p. 287.

our turning to set our hands to it and hold on to it with lives rededicated to a different, non-Herod way of living – well, that’s good news to just about everybody, *except* the despot who thought *he* was the only one reigning over something he can only hold on to by incarceration and corruption.

Finally: what causes the fishers to follow?

As Jesus steps into the void left behind by the arrest of John the Baptist, there are two things Mark wants us to know about him: that he is not without a word – and not without friends. From the very beginning, there was something to be said, and there were people who were changed by hearing it and who came to be involved in it, implicated by it. As singular a figure as Jesus was then, and is for us now, he was always *accompanied*, since the first words he ever spoke: always among companions whom he drew into the ripeness of time, drew near to the already-living reign to become intrinsic to its presence and meaning.

We can imagine the kind of hunger of the brothers on the beach for such news as that, to be willing to take the risks they took to satisfy it. The root meaning of the word “repent” is to turn – and we can wonder about the kinds of dangers and uncertainties they must have felt they were facing, to be as ready as they clearly were to turn and follow in a different direction.

But I think to understand what happened on the beach depends at least as much on how Jesus saw them as on how they saw him. Mark writes that “As Jesus passed along the sea he saw Simon and his brother Andrew” – and scholars note how much is submerged into that simple verb in the gospel of Mark, how Jesus’s way of seeing people was, not merely passive observation, but proactive vision – “possessive gaze”.<sup>2</sup> He sees not only their present but their purpose, the meaning of their lives. *You have it in you to help other people change the shape of their lives*, he says to them – and it’s not so much that they know him in those first moments on the beach but that they feel known by him, hungry for such purpose, and ready to draw closer to the new way of living that is already alive nearby and ready to welcome them in like old friends.

Of course, it’s hard to know whether Peter and Andrew, or James and John, could have heard all that in the few words that Jesus spoke to them as he stopped beside their nets on the shore. But the words you hear aren’t ever the whole story of what pulls your heart, are they? Don’t we decide whose lives will shape our own by considering the fruitfulness of their living?

I love the novelist and essayist Madeline L’Engle – whose words I’ve probably quoted for you before: that we do not draw people to Jesus by persuading them of the soundness of this doctrine or that idea; no, she says, we bring people to Jesus “by showing them a light so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Marcus, [Mark 1-8](#) [Anchor Bible] (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 183.

source of it.”<sup>3</sup> Something about the way Jesus saw them helped them to feel how near they were to the reign of God – and so they turned and made their way in that direction. All Jesus had to say was, “Come” – and the Greek has an emphatic flavor, almost like “Onward!” – and “at once,” with that same energy, they got up and followed.

Before long, of course, it would turn out that Herod, and for that matter the Empire, had a lot more to lose as this new way of living took hold. The time was riper – the reign was nearer – the stakes were higher – than anyone knew.

I wonder if you heard about a story that *The Washington Post* published just after Election Day four years ago<sup>4</sup> – about a young woman named Natasha Nkhama, born in Zambia, then a student at Baylor University. On that morning in early November she was walking across campus to a neuroscience class when another student bumped into her – shoved her off the sidewalk, really, and dropped the n-word on her for good measure. There was another student nearby who saw it all happen and stepped in – but the assailant just strolled away, saying over his shoulder, “Just trying to make America great again.” The whole episode, the likes of which Natasha had never experienced before anywhere, brought her to a standstill – but not for long. Within a few hours she had posted the story on her FaceBook page. “I have friends and family that believe that racism doesn’t exist, that it’s something that happened in the 1900s,” she told the *Post*. “This is something that happened to someone that you know.”

Two days later, Natasha had another neuroscience class. But the walk was different: 300 people showed up to walk with her.

It’s been said that we’re all here just to walk each other home.<sup>5</sup>

Now it’s four years later. Some things are different; some aren’t. We know more now than we knew before, maybe, about how the hunger for a light so lovely that it changes everything, makes you willing to turn into the ripeness of time, turn toward the nearness of the reign of God. More now, maybe, about how, if someone who really *saw* you could persuade you that you could make a difference, and if that someone then said something simple like “Onward!” you might just get up and go. Maybe it’s always the beginning of Jesus’s ministry all over again, not just in January – no matter how long you’ve been stuck untangling your nets – always the time of heart-hunger to know the source of such light as that. And maybe, if you were to decide to follow that light, you’d find yourself in the midst of the meaning of your own life: teaching or healing or feeding or welcoming... or something. Maybe you’d feel your choices turning on an axis of hope instead of bitterness and anger. Maybe you’d find yourself walking in the company of One who could teach you to believe that the reign of God is *so near*, after all. And in the company of others who’ll help you believe that too – because there have always been companions, since the very first words. Walking each other home.

Like probably every other preacher in every pulpit in this country this weekend, I find myself rejoicing in the company of the young poet Amanda Gorman<sup>6</sup>, walking home together. Let’s give the lovely light of her poetry the last word –

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<sup>3</sup> Madeline L’Engle, [Walking on Water](#).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/11/12/a-baylor-student-was-shoved-and-called-the-n-word-this-is-how-the-school-responded/?utm\\_term=.ef61e0ef16a8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/11/12/a-baylor-student-was-shoved-and-called-the-n-word-this-is-how-the-school-responded/?utm_term=.ef61e0ef16a8).

<sup>5</sup> This widely-quoted remark is often attributed to Ram Dass, the contemporary spiritual writer.

*Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:  
That even as we grieved, we grew  
That even as we hurt, we hoped  
That even as we tired, we tried  
That we'll forever be tied together, victorious  
Not because we will never again know defeat  
but because we will never again sow division  
Scripture tells us to envision  
that everyone shall sit under their own vine  
and fig tree  
And no one shall make them afraid  
If we're to live up to our own time  
Then victory won't lie in the blade  
But in all the bridges we've made  
That is the promised glade  
The hill we climb  
If only we dare*

*...We will rebuild, reconcile and recover  
and every known nook of our nation and  
every corner called our country,  
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,  
battered and beautiful  
When day comes we step out of the shade,  
afame and unafraid  
The new dawn blooms as we free it  
For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it  
If only we're brave enough to be it*

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<sup>6</sup> Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb" (excerpt), written for and delivered at the inauguration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., as the 46th President of the United States, January 20, 2021.

<http://townandcountry.mag/society/politics/a35279603/amada-gorman-inauguration-poem-the-hill-we-climb-transcript/>