

Why He Came
Isaiah 40:21-31
Mark 1:29-39

“When they found him, they said, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’”

Even though Mark tells us from the beginning that Jesus came preaching--that why he came, what he came out to do, was to proclaim the gospel of God--Mark records fewer words of Jesus than any other gospel: one collection of sayings in the thirteenth chapter and a few parables. Mark was not taken with words but with action. No doubt he lived in a time when people seeking to make sense of their lives followed great teachers around the countryside, quoting their sayings and citing their ethical injunctions. Even now, many sitting in pews {and even a good number standing in pulpits} are fond of putting Jesus in the genus of prophet or teacher, where he and his words can be fit into our reasonable ways of knowing what we know and doing what we do. But for Mark, Jesus could not be fit into any other way of human knowing or behaving than what he called God’s kingdom come near. In Jesus, Mark tells us, the reign of God had begun. That is to say, in him we have to do not with the best ethical example that ever lived or with a spiritual mentor who transcends space and time or with a miracle worker upon whom we may call when we are in need of a quick fix. In Jesus, the activity of God is revealed, the mighty works of the one Sovereign Lord are made manifest, God’s kingdom has come near.

Perhaps, then, it was Mark’s emphasis on the activity of God that led me, early on in my ministry—back when we had only the Revised Standard translation—to notice the repetition of this little adverb “immediately”, verse after verse after verse. Never before had it occurred to me to wonder whether Mark had intended I notice its repetition or whether he was merely the victim of an

editor without a thesaurus ready at hand to suggest he try “directly, instantaneously, thereupon, hereupon or whereupon”, for the sake of good literary style. The New Revised Standard Committee, if you were following along, clearly had Roget’s at their fingertips. Many commentators think this was a shame, and I tend to agree. There was surely a wisdom at work among the earlier scholars which kept them from obscuring, by way of pretty prose, the immediacy of God mediated, according to Mark, in Jesus Christ.

Jesus called Simon and Andrew and immediately they left their nets; Jesus saw James and John and immediately called them; Jesus went to Capernaum on the sabbath and immediately began teaching in the synagogue; no sooner had he started teaching when immediately a man with an unclean spirit cried out; Jesus called out the spirit and immediately his fame spread everywhere; immediately Jesus left the synagogue and went to Simon and Andrew’s home; immediately they told him of Simon’s sick mother-in-law and he healed her; that evening, the sick were cured and the possessed exorcised; Jesus touched the leper, said “Be clean” and immediately he was. Forty times in sixteen chapters Mark exclaims: Immediately!

Could it be that Mark was saying, with as much enthusiasm as he could muster in a word, repeated and written to a people who had been waiting centuries for the Messiah to come, "Here he is and behold, your lives are going to change at once in his presence? Shazam!" Perhaps. Though I think Mark was more taken with the practical and political implications of the immediacy of God’s reign than the paranormal. To say that the kingdom of God had come close in Jesus was to say that in him we have to do with the revelation of “a different power and the offer of another power structure,” writes James Luther Mays, a biblical scholar who reads Scripture with a minister’s heart. No matter the age, God’s reign stands in stark contrast to the powers and principalities currently

holding sway. “To say that God’s reign is at hand,” Mays continues, “is to say that there is present the possibility and opportunity for men [and women] to *live* by a different power and order from that of the cultures, societies, and governments that determine their existence.”

This possibility both entered human history at a specific time in Jesus of Nazareth and transcends every time and space because, says Mays, “where the gospel which begins with Jesus and has him as its substance is preached, there the reign of God is present. [Moreover] the speech that has Jesus as its substance is *the demand and chance* for men [and women] to live” as though God were sovereign over the course of their days. How might we hear that demand and take that chance here and now: immediately?

Let me say, in the first place, that I believe with all my heart and mind that he has come to you and that in him God’s reign has begun for your sakes. Yet as one called to represent the gospel in extremis or in times of great expectation, I know the word more likely to be repeated in the story you tell me of your life is the word “waiting.” Waiting for this moving, kicking creature to become a healthy, living child of God or for the adoption agency at last to call with news from a birth mother who has chosen you. Waiting on the edge of solvency to hear about a job or to hear from a friend estranged and lost. Waiting to be asked out, or asked in. Waiting for the lab report to come back, for the surgeon to come clean, for the second shoe to drop. Waiting for a broken bone to heal or a broken heart to stop aching. Waiting for the children all to be through college or the youngest finally to be in first grade. Waiting for grandma to come, for the dog to be housebroken, for the car to be fixed, for retirement to begin, the recession to end. The reality of our lives is that we wait, all of us.

But more, for in the second place, I think even when we do not know it, we are waiting. Like Simon and Andrew, James and John who could have fished their lives away little knowing anything

else, like the people in the synagogue who had gathered to listen to one more rabbi drone on about the scriptures, like the man possessed or like Simon's mother-in-law who fully expected to ride out her fever, like the sick and the possessed at eventide or the leper who could not conceive of waiting for the incurable to be cured, we are the everyone of whom the disciples spoke when they found Jesus in a deserted place praying. We believe we are waiting without him. So we wait not knowing, we wait not hoping, we wait not expecting anything out of the ordinary to enter in. And we could go on without a clue, save for *word of him* who came preaching, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near." Hidden in all the details of our waiting, says the prophet, is the One for whom we wait, the One in whom God's reign has begun. "Those who wait for the Lord," wrote Isaiah long ago, "shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Your waiting is over, says Mark as he invites us to glimpse the immediacy of God's reign in the lost found, the sick healed, the dead raised, the hungry fed, each miracle making us restless, to say the least, enraged, to tell the truth, with the powers that be politically.

But what is so hard to comprehend personally, what is so impossible to take in Sunday after Sunday, knowing our best friend is wrestling with depression and our neighbors are getting a divorce and our oldest child is absolutely without direction and our parents are suddenly in need of more care than we can give, what is so difficult to understand is this story of a Savior who stepped into human history, healing this one and saving that one while, for all intents and purposes, we are still waiting for him to come to us.

Perhaps, then, in the third place, the word "immediately" caught my eye because of the disparity between the biblical witness and what I know to be the case with so many. Perhaps. But as

always with my reading of Scripture, I suspect the problem is not so much a problem of disparity as it is a problem of dullness, a dullness I share with the disciples. When Mark says to us, as directly as he knows how, that our waiting is forever over, our wandering is at an end, our weariness is suddenly given rest, he is saying that the distance between ourselves and Almighty God is no farther than from here to the cross. And short of God doing anything for us, there is this overwhelming experience of his being with us, which is miracle enough!

So I went to scripture this past week, on your behalf and my own, in search of life when death seemed all too present, in search of health when disease seemed all too powerful, in search of direction when our common life seemed marked more by chaos than by careful purpose, in search of God's presence when so much about me seemed to speak of God's distance. And what I found, or what found me, were these words of Mark: a story about Jesus calling people from fishing to following him, a story about Jesus teaching with such authority all were astounded and amazed, a story about Jesus fighting the demons of the mind and healing the ills of the body. How else could Mark get it through our heads and hearts that in him (who was dead and is alive), God has come near? How else are we to know him day by day, except as the gospel, which begins with Jesus and has him as its substance, is preached? How else are we to repent and believe, except as the word proclaimed has in it the demand and chance for us to live as though God were sovereign over the course of our days?

In the end, you can blame our frustration with life's brokenness, this desire of ours for quick fixes, on the culture; but I suspect, finally, it has as much to do with a Creator who made us to long for a time "when death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things are passed away." That we want to write the stories of our lives and

include in those stories the word “immediately”: he had the operation and immediately was healed; she had the chemotherapy and immediately the cancer went away; they went to the counselor and immediately their marriage was saved; we went to the grave and immediately.... That we have in us an urgency about health and wholeness and purpose and meaning and life after death speaks some of our human aspirations; but I believe it speaks also of God’s intention for human existence, an intention revealed and fulfilled in the One Mark called the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

You and I will not see Him face to face until we taste of death. We will not hear voices, most likely, as we travel from here to there, nor will we see visions. We may never name any experience in our lives as a miracle nor be able to assure another that our prayers have been answered in the affirmative. But what I do know is this One who came to Simon and Andrew comes also to you; this One who did not hesitate to call James and John does not hesitate to call you; this One who spoke with authority to the congregation in Capernaum speaks even and often to this congregation; this One who wrestles with unclean spirits wrestles endlessly with the darkness that has hold of you; and this One who is ever by the side of those who suffer will never leave you nor those whom you love without his tender mercy. “What is it to me that God should have commanded David to do this or that, or called Paul to such and such a task?” asked John Baillie. “It is nothing at all, unless it should happen that, as I read of His calling and commanding them, I at the same time found Him calling and commanding me.” Why did he come? Thanks be to God who in Jesus Christ came for you!