

A Sense of Urgency
Jonah 3:1-10
Mark 1:14-20

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

What was it about Jesus that compelled Simon and Andrew, James and John to take leave of their jobs, their families and, from the perspective of our carefully calculated lives, to take leave of their senses *immediately*, as Mark puts it, with a sense of urgency most of us will never fathom this side of the grave.

In an essay exploring the tepid nature of Christian existence in our culture, Rod Dreher, senior editor at the *American Conservative*, writes, ““I live in a small town in rural south Louisiana. Most people go to church, and most people vote Republican; the conservatism is so gentle that even liberals feel at home. The parish council—that is to say, the county government—begins each meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance and the Our Father.

“Not long ago,” he goes on, “a Protestant man in my town who is involved in youth education at his church contacted me. He wanted to discuss what I had written about ‘moralistic therapeutic deism.’ Sociologist Christian Smith, who coined the term, said it is the ‘de facto dominant religion among contemporary teenagers in the United States.’” Moralistic therapeutic deism, Dreher continues, “is a vague, vapid approach to religion, one that can be summed up as: God exists, and he wants us to be nice to each other, and to be happy and successful.” According to the Protestant youth advisor, this was “the religion of the kids in his church, and it grieved him because, as far as he could tell, this was the religion that their parents wanted them to have.” By the way, I doubt this is the religion our youth are getting from Brian—even if it is the religion their parents want them to have! Nevertheless, as far as I can tell, moralistic therapeutic deism describes the religion practiced by the vast majority of Christians in our social and economic

strata. For as long as I have been ordained, nice ministers have led or left whole congregations to believe that following Jesus is mostly a matter of being nice and happy and successful.

This is not the sort of community Jesus began to gather on that day in Galilee, nor is it the witness Mark had in mind when he set out to write his Gospel amid Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In the face of death all around him, Mark meant to communicate the nearness of God's reign with an incredible sense of urgency. "To say that God's reign is at hand," writes biblical scholar and teacher James Luther Mays, "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 yet transcends every time and space; because, Mays says, "where the gospel which begins with Jesus and has him as its substance is preached, there the reign of God is present. The speech that has Jesus as its substance is the demand and chance for [people] to live" as though God's future kingdom—where all people are becoming wholly themselves—is happening here and now.

Yet the speech of the church takes its cue from the remnants of a self-satisfied culture, rather than the urgent claim of a life-changing Lord. Far from wrenching us out of the lives we are leading, the fish we are frying, the choices we are making—choices generally with our own happiness and success in mind--the substance of the church's speech blesses our way of life by preaching civic morality, feel-good therapy and a vague notion of God unfettered by the radical particularity of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That is why, if the few verses before us from Mark's Gospel this morning are disturbing at all, they upset us with the thought that these men are leaving their families and their businesses in the lurch to follow Jesus. Nice, responsible Christians do not do this!

That is also why I think the community gathered and sent out by Mark's Gospel, the community that responded *immediately* to news of God's reign come near in Jesus Christ, was a community *in extremis*. Utterly vulnerable before the power of death that Rome held over them, as soldiers destroyed the temple and crucified countless thousands of God's people, these fearful souls opened their hearts and minds and lives to the proclamation of a radically different power, the power of self-giving love, mediated through the life, death and resurrection of an equally vulnerable Jew from Nazareth. And they did so without hesitation. No less than forty times does the word *eutheos* appear in Mark's Gospel: *immediately!*

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; *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; Jesus touched the leper, said "Be clean" and *immediately* he was. Mark's point is not that, in Christ's presence, things happened quickly. Rather Mark is saying, in Jesus, God's future is present, God's power is mediated, God's purposes are made manifest: the lame are walking, the blind are seeing, the lepers are being cleansed, the oppressed freed, the demons banished, sinners forgiven, the hungry fed, and the dead raised. *Wherever and whenever the power and possibility of love is countering the continuing destruction and death of Rome's decrees, God's reign has begun.*

This is not good news for those who benefit from things as they are; whose main aim in life is to be happy and successful. In fact, when God entrusts the urgency of his word to someone content with present power arrangements, Jonah's story repeats itself. Jonah flees, hides, and

would rather die than bear witness to God's word among the wicked. When finally he trudges across the evil city of Nineveh announcing the urgency of God's judgment, to his horror God's word is effective. Jonah wants to see the wicked burn in hell rather than be redeemed by the God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. To bear witness to the urgency of God's word, the longing for the life of *all* to be made whole must be acute.

The eschatological community Jesus began to gather when he called Andrew and Simon, James and John is hidden today in communities on the lookout for God's future reign breaking into the midst of their life together; they are communities alive to the power and possibility of love countering the death that threatens to overtake their hearts and minds. Such is the witness of one minister in Aleppo, whose words have about them the urgency of Mark's Gospel and have haunted me ever since I read them. Like Mark's community, his people are utterly vulnerable to the power of death; and like Mark's community, they live with an urgent belief that, in the small daily triumphs of love over death, God's reign has begun among them. Rev. Ibrahim Nsier writes from Aleppo:

This morning I woke up early at 4:30 to the sound of a mortar exploding. I said to myself, "A new day is started." This is something normal in Aleppo. I went to the kitchen to get some tea or Nescafe, but I had an urgent call from one of our members who was injured by the shelling. He needed someone to take him to the hospital. I got my shoes and got to the car quickly. Thanks to God, they dealt with his wounds very quickly, and he was in church for our service.

The church where we worshipped before the war was bombed, so now we meet in an apartment building. It's up five floors, almost 120 stairs. We have had mortars hit the building, but God saved us and as many as 150 of us continue to worship there.

Being a pastor in this crisis is not as much about preaching as it is being with the people in their difficult time. Even if we cannot give money or fulfill their physical needs, we can at least pray with them, at least try to comfort them.

After the service, I received another call—two older women who had not one ounce of water and had run out of money to purchase water after paying for their rent and

medicine. I got my family and went looking for someone in order to get them water, which I am sorry to say costs a lot of money....

After that I received more calls asking me to go quickly to look for a home for two people whose houses were damaged from the mortar attacks that morning. We called a family from church that was out of town. They agreed to lend their house for a week until we can make repairs.

This day I described is like every day. Even what I have said doesn't describe fully what is going on. I am thankful to my wife and my family who remain with me in Aleppo during this crisis.... We have three children, ages 6 to 12. This situation has forced itself all over their lives. My children, when they hear a lot of bombing, they come to our room to feel a little bit secure. When we send our children to school, believe me, we say goodbye to each other because we don't know if we'll have the opportunity to see each other again. Always we teach the children that although it is difficult in this time, our security is in God. We try to teach them that we suffer as Jesus suffered and that the day of resurrection will come someday.

We believe we have a lot left to do in this community.... We are not only supporting Christians, we are supporting the whole community to teach them that being a human means having a responsibility to the others. Believe me, we never think in ways that this is Muslim or this is Christian. We think differently. We think we are here for a message and this message should be clear for everybody—that God loves all people and I insist on the word "all." We are called to live in hope. We trust God and we do our job—praying, taking care of each other, reading the Bible and being an instrument of love and peace in this community. This is what we do, and this is the hope we live in. Please don't forget us in your prayers.

We have sent \$6000 of our mission tithe to the Synod of Syria and Lebanon in support of the urgent witness of churches in Aleppo and Homs and Latakia. Perhaps that is as close as we will get to God's kingdom come near. God knows that I do not wish such horror on us. And yet, in a city where violence and hunger and homelessness and hopelessness and fear and distrust abound, are the conditions not also here for us to live with a sense of urgency, proclaiming through the small daily triumphs of love over death, that God's reign has begun among us? "What is it to me that God should have...[summoned Simon and Andrew, James and John to follow] or called Paul to such and such a task?" John Baillie asked. "It is nothing at all, unless it

should happen that, as I read of His calling and commanding them, I at the same time [find] Him calling and commanding me." Amen.