

St John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, Connecticut

Power Belongs to God

Sermon by Fleming Rutledge

Epiphany III, January 22, 2012

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)

Two questions:

First: Why did those men fishing on the Sea of Galilee abandon their families, their workers, and their entire livelihood on the beach and take off after a man they had never seen before?

Second: And why does Mark use the word "immediately" (*euthus*, also translated "at once") so often?

These two questions are closely related.

Mark's Gospel is very popular today. I've even heard it said that Mark is the gospel to have if you're having only one. This high regard for Mark is a relatively new phenomenon. Matthew holds the place of honor in the New Testament, being first, and it contains the Sermon on the Mount. Luke has the beloved nativity stories, the Good Samaritan, and the Prodigal Son. John's gospel, in a class by itself, possesses a numinous quality that has always exerted a pull upon readers. In contrast, Mark was said to be primitive, rough, undeveloped, written in bad Greek, not to be compared with the other three.

Nobody thinks that any more. Many decades of scholarship and interpretation have shown us that Mark has a deep theological and narrative structure that's the equal of any of the other three and a dynamic all its own. The sophisticated way the gospel is put together is easy to miss, though, because the story is told in a blunt fashion that appears naïve and artless until it's examined.

Mark is by far the shortest gospel, as you know. It's a gospel of incessant movement. In Mark, Jesus is never still. He strides through Judea from town to town,

taking charge and causing controversy wherever he goes. Everything happens “immediately.”

Mark’s introduction is like no other; he announces that he is telling the good news of the Son of God, and then he plunges right into the action. John the Baptist flashes onto the scene, electrifies the countryside, draws huge crowds, and proclaims the arrival of “one more powerful than I” who will baptize not merely with water, but with the Holy Spirit. Jesus instantly arrives at the Jordan River and receives baptism from John as the heavens are torn open by the Father, who confirms Jesus as his Son, but in a voice that only Jesus hears. “Immediately” the Spirit sends Jesus out into the desert for a 40-day confrontation with the devil. Jesus emerges victorious from this ordeal and without a pause begins his ministry of announcing the Kingdom of God. Along the shore of the Galilean lake he strides, collecting fishermen as he goes—he does not invite, but commands, and “immediately” they drop everything and follow him, leaving their previous lives behind. Such is the radical nature of the summons of Jesus Christ.

We can’t get the full impression if we read Mark in snippets. If we read it all at once, it’s obvious that Jesus is constantly on the move doing things. His very first public action is to drive away demons. They have no ability to withstand him. They know who he is. The reader also knows, because Mark has told us at the beginning, but no one in the story knows except the demons. They know. They know that he has the power to destroy them. As Martin Luther writes in his great hymn. “Their doom is sure.”¹ The people of the region are dumbfounded by his power over demons; they say, “What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

Jesus moves on. He heals sick people. He reaches out and touches a leper, which of course no one ever did, and the leper is healed “immediately.” He calms the storm on the sea. He makes a paralyzed man get up and walk, but not until he forgives his sins. He attracts huge crowds of admirers but he sends the religious leaders into frenzies of hostility; they are out to kill him almost from the beginning. They say, “He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” which, of course, is exactly the point.

All of this serves to build up a picture of enormous energy and power. In Mark, Jesus is an “action figure.” His words are not so much teachings as they are propellants. They result in extraordinary happenings. You’ll be hearing these stories all during this lectionary year. The more of these wonders he performs, however, the more the religious leaders hate him. When he heals a paralyzed man on the Sabbath, he does it almost as if he’s provoking them deliberately. We begin to get the impression that he’s courting danger. And yet he keeps his “messianic secret,” not letting anyone in on what the demons know. Listen to this from the third chapter:

[Jesus] healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. And whenever the unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down before him

¹ *Ein’ Feste Burg*, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

and cried out, “You are the Son of God.” And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.

The demons know him, but so far no one else does. How do they know him? Because they know his origins. They go all the way back to the original Fall of Adam, when they were first allowed to afflict the creation and to torment human beings. They know the One who was “present at the creation.” But the incarnate Son doesn’t permit them to spread this news. His identity won’t be publicly affirmed until the chosen moment, on his own terms. The “messianic secret” won’t be revealed until Good Friday when the Roman centurion, watching the man on the cross take his last breath, says, “Surely this was the Son of God.” This is Mark’s plan, to withhold the full revelation of Jesus Christ until he dies on the cross. Then he is made known to the Roman Empire and to the whole Gentile world.

But let’s go back to those two questions. Why do the fishermen follow this man? And why does everything happen “immediately”?

If you look back at your copy of the Psalm we just read, you will see an answer, in verse 13:

God has spoken once, twice have I heard it,
That power belongs to God. (Psalm 62:13)

This motif underlies the entire Old Testament. God only needs to speak once for me to hear twice, for ultimate power belongs only to God. This is the most distinctive feature of the Judeo-Christian tradition, this idea of the Word of God which creates what it commands. If God says “let there be light,” light comes into being where there was no light before. If God says to Abraham or Moses or Elijah, get up and go where I tell you, they go. If God says to Isaiah or Jeremiah or Amos, say this to the people of Israel, they protest, but God says, “I will be with you,” so they go and say it. God’s Word is power. There are no visions of God in the Bible that do not have words. The purpose of the visions is to capture attention for the words that follow.

So when Jesus of Nazareth walks along the shore of the lake and says “Follow me,” the fishermen do so “immediately.” That’s what Mark wants us to see. The Word of God is effective in what it commands. All four Evangelists present this, each in his own way. In the famous prologue of John’s Gospel, it is spelled it out theologically:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

All four Gospels dramatize this for us, but none more dramatically or more economically than Mark. This mysterious person who calls people into his service without giving them a chance to say no is the incarnate Word of God. Although the

reader is let into the secret from the beginning, in the drama there is no public acknowledgement until the last act. The Messiah is recognized by a Gentile, a member of the hated occupying powers, precisely at the moment when Satan appears to be victorious. And then the Gospel ends in the most extraordinary way. The women go to the tomb on the first day of the week, after the Sabbath observance is ended. They find the stone rolled away and an angel who says “He is risen! He is not here!” and the Gospel of Mark ends with this verse:

And [the women] went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

This way of ending is so strange that for a long time scholars thought the ending had been lost.² Most interpreters now think that Mark intended it to be strange. In his abrupt fashion he wanted us to understand that the resurrection of Christ is an event so far out of the ordinary that it cannot be properly responded to in any usual way. Mark wants to leave us with “trembling and astonishment.”

I heard a story the other day, told by a woman who got a telephone call from a salesperson at a store who was reminding her to pick up something she had ordered. The woman said she was sorry that she had not come but her husband had just been diagnosed with cancer. The saleswoman said, “Oh! Well, have a nice day.”

Mark wants to show us that “Oh! Well, have a nice Easter” is not quite the way to respond to the coming of the power of God.³ The incarnation, the ministry, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ have shaken the world off its hinges. The Kingdom of God (to quote Luther again) has broken into “this world with devils filled.” Christ has invaded the territory of the enemy and seized the beachheads. We—the followers of Christ—are his representatives behind the enemy lines until all is complete according to the purpose of God.

We don’t see that happening now, do we? The demons are everywhere: cancer, poverty, violence, suicide, terrorism, war, greed, selfishness, a divided church, the murderous drug trade, political chicanery, environmental degradation, religious persecution. The demons are having a field day. In “this present evil age” as St Paul calls it (Galatians 1:4), the victory of Jesus Christ can be seen only by faith.

But that has always been true. Those fishermen couldn’t see the Kingdom with their ordinary eyesight any better than you and I can. Those provincial laborers became apostles, confronted kings, and died as martyrs to the Name of the One who summoned

² The continuation which is found in most Bibles (Mark 16:9-20) is acknowledged to be a non-Markan addition. It is not found in the most reliable early manuscripts. It very briefly and, it must be said, rather blandly summarizes the Easter appearances that we read of in much greater detail in the other Gospels. It contains nothing really notable except the much-misused “sign” that believers will “take up serpents.”

³ In recent years, an Advent responsory, “I look from afar,” has become widely used in Episcopal churches on the first Sunday of Advent. The words include “I saw the power of God coming.”

them from their nets. Those men, who are pictured in these stained-glass windows, lived by faith. They received their message in the mode of promise, that which *will come* by the power of God. That power was demonstrated in the command of the compelling stranger who said, “Follow me,” even though it was a call to suffer for his sake.

We don’t know why some are called and not others. We don’t know why the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, is manifest to some and not to others. That is a mystery known only to God. What we do know is that the message about him is the power that is creating and will create a new heaven and a new earth, the new heaven and the new earth that was revealed to St. John on the island of Patmos, pictured above this altar.⁴ May this news be for you this day a message of the Life that overcomes death, the hope that overcomes despair, the joy that overcome sorrow, the righteousness that overcomes sin, and the Love that overcomes hate, for it is the Lord Jesus himself, today, calling *you* and offering to *you* his entire self, the life of the one and eternal God. For the power of the world to come belongs to him.

Let us pray together:

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world might perceive the glory of his marvellous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

⁴ The tripartite window pictures the young, beardless apostle in the center, his call on the left, and “The Revelation to St. John the Divine” on the right. John is bearded and elderly in the Revelation scene, according to tradition. In actual fact, the Seer of Revelation was almost certainly not the same John as Jesus’ actual disciple, but Revelation is very much in the Johannine tradition, so the appellation has a certain authenticity.