January 24th, 2021 • 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany • Online Worship

“Dare to Dream: Incarnation Is the Point”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 1:14-20
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.

Jesus says: “Come and follow me.”

Today we hear a second version of the call of the disciples. And as we saw last week, these were tough times in which Jesus was launching his new movement, living into the ancient dream of peace and justice. Now we hear the bad news that John the Baptist had been arrested. I guess that spurred Jesus on to live deeper into the dream. Mark tells us that Jesus left for Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time is fulfilled,” he announced to any who would listen, “the kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe in the good news.”

Jesus began to move throughout the whole region, teaching about the kingdom of God that, in him, was at last coming near to the people. He traveled amongst them, preaching the good news, and healing every disease and affliction.

There were fishing villages all along the Galilean seaside—Capernaum, Bethsaida, Magdala. Jesus spent time there. He was familiar with the lives of fishermen, just as he was with shepherds and farmers and carpenters. He knew their work and the challenges they faced.

And he saw the critical importance of the larger picture as well. The people in that region were living under the rule of the Roman government. These are the people of whom the prophet Isaiah wrote: “land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, the people who sat in darkness.” It was there that Jesus begins his ministry. In the land of darkness.

As his teaching, preaching and healing begin to spread, like light in the darkness, the kingdom of God dawns. Jesus begins to invite others to join him in its creation, to take their part in living into the dream.

We’re off and running now. Jesus is working his plan. I hope you’ll see from the beginning that what he’s up to here is very different from tossing out the imperial army or overthrowing the government, as dangerous and menacing as they were. Instead, he’s building a new community. He’s changing humanity from the inside out, not the outside in. He’s changing lives, profoundly, but simply, rather organically, we might say. Here’s what I mean.

According to Mark’s account, Jesus was walking by the sea and saw two fisherman, Simon and Andrew, brothers, doing their work, casting their nets into the sea. Come, follow me, Jesus says to them, “and I will make you fish for people.”

They go a bit farther and see James, son of Zebedee and his brother, John. “Follow me,” Jesus says.”

Now you’ve got to be careful with this story, it seems to me, because really, “fishing for people” is not a very appealing image. Have you ever seen fish caught in a net? It’s not really anywhere you’d want to be yourself, right?

The thing is, Jesus isn’t drawing a direct parallel between people and fish here. Making disciples of Jesus Christ does not ask us to get a big net ourselves and haul people in against their will. I think something very different is happening in this story. Jesus sees two fishermen and then two more, real people, flesh and blood ordinary people, and speaks to them in language they will understand. He talks with them about nets and fish. If he had seen two farmers in a field first, he would
have talked to them about sowing and planting. If he had seen two women at the well first, he would have talked to them about buckets and water and thirsts.

This is the lesson for us. Jesus meets people where they are, as they are, for who they are, and says: hey. God has sent us some really good news. I’d like you to be part of living into it, in ways that are familiar and comfortable to you, using language you already speak, bringing who you are and what you know, the gifts you already have—to reach out and share this great good news with others so that God’s light may shine in their places of darkness as well.

Right from the get go in his ministry, Jesus is not doing things the way a leader would have typically done it. On the one hand, it was traditional for disciples to seek out teachers. Or on the other hand, for military officers to commandeers recruits. In contrast, the very first things Jesus does is to invite followers to become part of something new and immediately empowers them to do the same, to invite more followers.

If this is a net, it is a net of relationships, of people connecting with other people naturally, the people they see during the day, the people they pass, the people they work with, the people they know, and sharing with them something that will sound good to their ears and to their hearts and to their souls. Jesus, this divine free agent of mercy and grace, sets out to expand and deepen people’s experience of God through a new community of faithful living and speaking and healing that brings wholeness and happiness and light.

A colleague of mine once put it this way: “God is with us. Incarnation is the point.”

God incarnate in Jesus. God’s dream incarnate, embodied, lived in Jesus. God’s good news lived in Jesus—and in his followers. In those first fishermen, and now in us.

What we want to remember today from the story of Simon and Andrew and James and John is to stay with what is familiar to us and find ways, in the daily living of our lives, to share what faith means to us in ways that are authentic and that connect fairly easily with others who share our same longings and spiritual need. If you stay with what you know, you will find that you have what you need to share with others and invite them to be followers of Christ as you are.

Paul says it this way in his letter to the church in Corinth: “In every way, you have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every kind, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift…God is faithful. God has called you into this fellowship of Jesus Christ.”

You’ve got the gifts, Paul assures us. They come from God, and God is faithful. You don’t have to have all the answers. You don’t have to be perfect or have it all together. You just have to say O.K., I’ll start following you, Jesus. Step by step. Day by day. For I believe that you are the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And I see now that all you ask is that I follow, that I get caught up in all that you are saying and doing and revealing and sharing. That I live with you, and in you, and everything else will follow. We become part of his new dream, this web of relationships, from which we draw strength and hope.

As Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman writes: “For there is always light/if only we’re brave enough to see it/if only we’re brave enough to be it.”

“Come,” Jesus says. “Come and follow me.”

AMEN

Notes: