



Good News

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 21, 2018

Mark 1:14-20

Once when I was in seminary a number of years ago I was sitting in a coffeeshop totally absorbed in reading one of my class textbooks about pastoral care. I was pretty surprised when all of a sudden, a wild-haired, middle aged, nicotine-smelling man sat down in the booth opposite me. Without introducing himself he said, “I see you’re reading a book. Let me ask you a question. Have you ever bought a book because of the blurb on its jacket?”

If a conversation is a tennis match, let’s just say I wasn’t sure I wanted to lob this particular ball back over the net. But I decided to be polite. So I answered him and said, “I don’t pay that much attention to the blurbs on the jacket. I usually buy a book because someone recommended it to me or because I researched it and found it on Amazon.” He said, “Exactly! Blurbs are marketing gimmicks that don’t actually tell you anything about what’s inside the book—they’re just trying to manipulate you into buying it. A really good book sells itself.” I had to agree. Then he asked, “So what are you reading?” I smiled brightly and told him I was reading a book called *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* for my studies at seminary to become a priest. In about five seconds he was gone.

Actually, his question got me thinking about how it is we know when someone has something worthwhile to tell us—or when we’re being manipulated. In today’s gospel text Jesus begins his public ministry by announcing that the time has been fulfilled, and that the kingdom of God has come near. He urges everyone to “repent and believe the good news.” The very next thing he does, before healing anyone or performing any amazing miracles, is to find four backwater fishermen and call them to “follow him.” Amazingly, they do. Why? How did Jesus convince them that he was worth following in a few short seconds?

Mark's gospel doesn't explain very much. All Jesus says to Simon and Andrew his brother is this: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they leave their nets and follow him.

I find it moving that Jesus meets them exactly as they are, for who they are and what they do—fishermen—and then promises to transform that vocation into something bigger and intriguing, to fish for people. There is a connection between Jesus' call to repent and believe the good news, and Jesus calling the disciples to follow him. The good news is that Jesus can meet them as they are and transform them into something that as yet is unimaginable. A few weeks ago we read the story from Genesis about how in the beginning, God used the pre-existent chaos in the universe, the deep and the water that was the symbol of chaos in the ancient world, to create this extravagantly beautiful world. From the beginning of our tradition and our scriptures, we learn that God loves to create beauty out of messes and chaos. In this text, Jesus is promising to make something new out of what the disciples already are. Jesus is promising that the kingdom of God has come very near to them who lived in colonized Israel in the kingdom of Rome, to us who live in the kingdom of the U.S. under Donald Trump. I think this promise of new creation—for us as individuals and for us as a society—is the good news that persuades the disciples to follow Jesus.

You will notice that Jesus does not ask them to sign on the dotted line under the Nicene Creed. At this point in the game, he does not insist that they believe he is the Messiah, or be willing to lay down their lives, or do anything other than "follow him." The word "follow" here in the Greek is the same word that in other places is translated "come to me"—for example, in the famous text from Matthew that says "come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Those other things we associate with "following Jesus"—a deeper understanding of Jesus' identity, a willingness to do anything to follow the life-giving way Jesus teaches—come later. But it is a very long road to Pentecost. So this text is teaching us what a life of discipleship is about at the very beginning, and what it takes to embark on an incredible spiritual journey with Christ—for the first time, or the hundredth time.

To experience the good news Jesus is talking about, the new creation God can make of us, all it takes to start the journey is a willingness to approach God in Jesus with honesty about everything you are, combined with even a molecule of trust. Enough trust to stay engaged, to orient yourself toward Jesus and this

strange Way he promises holds life and new creation for us. Trust to believe that this is not a blurb on a book jacket trying to manipulate you, but something profoundly real.

When I was in my mid-thirties I began a training program to become a spiritual director. The program required me to do something called the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, which meant that I had to spend one hour every day praying silently over a text from Christian scripture. Now at the time I didn't really identify myself as a Christian. And to be honest, when I read the Bible I usually found it annoying, or offensive, or boring. So I was not at all wild about the idea of praying silently over it for an hour a day. However, I really loved spiritual direction as a respectful and non-manipulative way to explore God. So I took a deep breath and agreed to do these prayers.

During those hours of "prayer" I spent a lot of time in pent up frustration about religion and inability to relate to anything I was reading. One day I just couldn't stand it any more, and told God that I found nothing of value in praying with scripture. If God wanted me to have meaning in the experience God was going to have to make that happen. And I just stopped trying.

In the silence after this rant, a strange phrase came to my mind. It was: "A vow of honesty."

A what?

It came again. "A vow of honesty."

After I sat with this for a while I felt maybe I was being invited to just keep showing up, and be completely honest. I felt God inviting me to go beneath my rants to a deeper honesty, a vulnerable transparency, about who I was and who I wanted to be.

To show up, be deeply honest, and stay engaged, is I think what Jesus was calling those disciples to do, at the beginning. He was saying, take the risk to come as you are. This beginning holds the promise of both acceptance and transformation. It is a beginning that has no hint of manipulation, but is full of good news. It's a beginning worth returning to, for the first time or for the thousandth time.

I invite you to consider the ways in which your own encounter with God in Christ has been or might be genuinely “good news.” How might God meet you for everything that you are, and invite you to be fully honest with God? How might you show up at St. Stephen’s and risk authenticity and humility about your gifts and your struggles? How might you direct every part of who you are, the good and the developing and the parts that need healing and forgiveness, directly to God? Whatever it is that you have to say to God, believe me, God can take it. God might even surprise you and have something to say to you.