

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:6-14
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

Many of us have been in the aggravating situation of feeling a sense of urgency when those around us don't. We might be trying to get children ready for the school bus or even ready for church or perhaps a visit to the dentist's office. Our sense of things is that we must hurry up or we'll be late. Maybe even that we must get a move on because if we're late we're going to miss it...which may be just fine with the children, but not for us. Trying to instill a sense of urgency in someone who doesn't see it or feel it can be a very frustrating experience!!

That sense of urgency is reflected in the gospel of Mark which delivers information about Jesus and his ministry at a rapid fire pace. In the first thirteen verses of the gospel of Mark, Isaiah is quoted as predicting that a messenger will be sent; Jesus is proclaimed by John the Baptist as the one we have all been waiting for and the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit; Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River; the dove of the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus accompanied by a voice from heaven confirming Jesus as God's Son; and Jesus spends 40 days and nights in the wilderness withstanding the temptations of the devil and locked in a cosmic battle between good and evil which Jesus wins. And that's just the first thirteen verses. The sense of urgency in the gospel of Mark continues throughout with the repeated use of the word "immediately!"

Today's reading from Mark begins at the fourteenth verse in chapter one and it announces the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. In the wake of John's arrest, Jesus announces, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Notice that the call to repent from Jesus is different from the call to repent from John the Baptist. The call from John the Baptist is a call to change direction, to change a way of thinking

and a way of living in order to *prepare* to receive the messenger from God, the long awaited Messiah.

The call to repent coming from Jesus is a bit different. Jesus announces first that the scriptures have been fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. His call to repent is not in *preparation* for receiving that kingdom. His call to repent is in *response* to the fact that the kingdom has already arrived in the person of Jesus. It's here!! Change your direction. Change your mind. Change your way of life as you encounter the kingdom of God. The sense of urgency comes from the fact that the kingdom has, in fact, already arrived. We don't have to wait for it any more. We don't have to prepare for it any more. All we need to do is embrace it as it comes close to us. And in order to embrace it, we have to look at everything in a new way. And we need to do it now lest we miss it!!

We are in the middle of the season of Epiphany when we are still trying to recognize what we see in the person of Jesus. Today we hear additional stories about those who responded immediately to the call from Jesus to "Follow me." As incredulous as it seems to us that the brothers James and John would leave their father, Zebedee, and just walk away from the family fishing business and leave their father with the hired hands, that's what they did. They didn't agonize over it. They didn't hesitate. They didn't debate it. They didn't try to get their family to understand their decision. They simply dropped their nets in place and literally followed Jesus as he walked away. That's pretty amazing!

Peter and Andrew did much the same thing. Jesus told them that he would make them 'fishers of men' and they left their nets right where they were and they followed him. No discussion. No questions about the vision of what was to come or about the business model that Jesus had in mind. They just did it.

On the surface of things, answering the call from Jesus can look a little crazy and impulsive. We have no idea what the families of these men must have thought. We don't even know what the men themselves thought. Did they have reservations? Did they have questions? Did they have any idea what they were getting into? Did they already know Jesus or know something about him or was he a complete stranger to them?

It's hard to imagine doing what these four men did without knowing more about the circumstances. And it's hard to imagine that any of us would do likewise. We are all responsible people with obligations that we want to fulfill. What do we do when we feel 'called' to walk away from those? Would Jesus in this day and age ask us to do such a thing? Would Jesus ask us to simply walk away from all that we hold dear in order to follow him?

Those are all good questions. And they deserve our contemplation. In twenty-first century America, answering the call from Jesus can still seem to be a little crazy and a bit impulsive. And Jesus doesn't always call us to leave behind all that we love, but Jesus *does* call us to leave behind much of what we think and how we feel. Jesus *does* ask us to do things that we think we cannot do or to go to places that we don't want to go. Jesus *does* demand from us that we trust Him. He *does* demand of us that we pay attention to those inner 'callings' to do and be something different. Jesus *does* ask that we be willing to set aside our long-held notions of how things are or how things ought to be and instead to embrace with him the way *he* wants them to be.

Callings from God and callings from Jesus are always a bit disruptive. Answering those calls requires from us a willingness to try what we haven't tried or perhaps to give up a perspective in thinking that we may have held for a lifetime. It requires us to stretch ourselves in ways we've never dreamed of and perhaps don't want to do.

Just look at what happened to Jonah in our first reading this morning. Jonah quite clearly heard God call him to go to Nineveh and warn the people that they needed to change direction and return to God. They needed to give up their sinful ways or they would be destroyed. The people of Nineveh were arch enemies of the people of Israel. There's no way that Jonah was going to go willingly into the lion's den to warn them. It would be like asking us to go to ISIS and ask them to repent. Anyone in their right mind would say, "No!" And yet, God was persistent and insistent. How many of us would be willing to approach our enemies with a message of warning and a plea to return to God? Jonah was left with little choice by the end of the tale and he ended up doing exactly as God had asked. Much to his surprise, the people of Nineveh heard him and changed their ways and were saved.

How many of us are willing to follow Jesus into some situation that we find difficult? How many of us are willing to allow our thinking to be changed so that we can follow Jesus where he leads us? How many of us are willing to go where we do not want to go in order to answer Jesus' call to us? And how many of us, like the fishermen, Peter and Andrew and James and John, are completely clueless about what our lives will be like if we follow Jesus into unknown territory?

Many times, Jesus calls us to remain in place, but to alter our perspective. If we have any doubts, those calls tend to be those nagging and persistent tugs at us to do something we don't want to do but something that we know is the right thing to do. We resist because we don't want to do it. We hold back because it will be hard. We hesitate or procrastinate because we are afraid. We forget that Jesus will be with us every step of the way. We forget that if we walk into that situation we dread with our hearts completely open and dependent upon God, we will be given the wisdom and the strength to answer that call...just as Jesus has asked us to do.

The urgency remains. We are still being called today to answer Jesus right now. To do as we have been called to do...without hesitation or reservation. Jesus is very patient and God is very insistent, but if we delay too long, we might miss it! We might be too late and we'll miss the whole thing.

The time is now for the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Give up that grudge. Forgive completely that person who has hurt you. Behave in a loving way to someone you don't like. Do it now or you might miss your chance. Change direction...for God is with us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and through him all things are possible.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.