

Epiphany 3 Year B
Mark 1:14-20
January 21, 2018
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

Risky Business

“Now after John was arrested...”

Do we live in Risky times? Consider what it was like to live in first century Palestine. Any kind of dissent would be harshly opposed, and those who challenged the authorities faced the death penalty if it was expedient politically. Thus, Herod Antipas had spared John the Baptist from execution because he feared the public outcry that might result. But we know how that story ended ultimately.

As John the Baptist's ministry was ending, Jesus was getting started, recruiting followers to help him in his mission. The fact that Jesus chose this precarious time to start preaching his message and calling for change was very, very risky. He might have waited until Herod had left the throne, but there was no guarantee that the replacement might not be far worse.

God took the risk to become one of us. There is nothing more vulnerable than a baby lying in front of you, nothing more helpless and dependent. God did not fear taking risks. You set aside such fear when you truly love someone. In fact, the willingness to take such risks is a strong indicator of the love that someone has for another. Consider that when someone is willing to lay down their life for a stranger. That love is extremely strong, and is motivated by God. “Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” It is difficult to wrap your mind around it. Consider those who are humble heroes in our own time, who set aside fear of danger to help another, whether in time of battle, or in an emergency. People who do this are first and foremost lovers. Somewhere, somehow they learned to put others ahead of themselves and their own need for safety. That is also what God did.

Now if John and Jesus were risk takers, how about the disciples who did so? Mark describes them as responding immediately to the summons of Jesus to follow Him and help Him out. They risked losing their livelihoods to follow this preacher. They stood to lose everything in their poverty where they struggled to work hard and provide for themselves and those dependent upon them. Something empowered them to do it. The personality of Jesus, the magnetism of his message and presence led them to lay down their nets and follow Him. And we also know how this story ended: they all laid down their lives for what they professed and believed and taught to others, every one of them. Talk about risk taking.

When we think about risk, we usually think about financial arrangements and investments. Sometimes the risk is greater than simply losing your money. We risk trusting others, from a spouse to our children. Trust can trump our fear of taking risks.

For example, when we allow our teenage son or daughter to borrow the family car, we trust that they will be careful with it and drive in a safe way. We trust that what we have taught them and modeled for them has taken hold. When we sign the paper at the doctor's office that will allow them to operate on us when we have a medical problem, we are also taking a risk. We can either live with the problem in fear of having the surgery, or we can risk our lives to feel better. Or when we can no longer tolerate a bone-crushing job that demoralizes us, we can take the risk of looking for a new vocation, a new job. We may even be empowered to leave the old job before starting a new one. We are ready to take the risk of making changes in our lives that will pave the way to a more fulfilling life.

Everything in life involves risk taking: driving to work in the morning; walking across the street; flying to visit a far off friend or relative. All of these involve risk. We quickly calculate in our minds what risks are worth taking, or we push aside the anxiety we may have about our choices.

I am here to tell you this morning, that of all the risks life has to offer us, there is only one which is imperative, I believe, we must take: the risk of faith in God. Some risks that you take may either disappoint you or put you at peril or even hurt you. The risk of faith will not only help and support you, it will sustain you and put all the other fears and anxieties you may have away from you.

Faith happens when we have enough trust. Do you have enough trust in God to make your faith a priority in risk taking? When you get on a rollercoaster at an amusement park, you trust in the safety of the ride and the park management. Most of the time that trust is well placed, but in a few instances, it is not. Our God will never let you down. God is not an amusement park ride whose safety is dependent upon the trustworthiness of human beings. Our God keeps God's promises and word.

Faith is what really trumps fear and enables risk-taking. Faith is an expression of our trust in God. Faith is our reaction to the invitation to follow Jesus, just as the disciples did when they heard Jesus call them from their boats and nets. Faith is trust, which is born of love and borne out in love. And love does not disappoint. Neither does God!

AMEN