

IT'S ALL ABOUT TIMING

Mark 1: 14-20

I am constantly amazed at the questions and inquiries that pastors receive. We are the font of all knowledge and yet know very little.

While a pastor, I had people coming to me with all kinds of issues. I particularly remember an “epidemic” of teenage crises in the church. It was primarily a panic on the side of parents. So, they came to me, a young, single, never married man whom they wanted advice from on how to raise children.

All kinds of other requests would come in as well. So, I created two sayings that helped me (at least) put into perspective how to “process” or “handle” problems when it was out of my field.

For crises that seemed to be immediate, I made the following statement: “What difference will the issue make in 20 years?” If it was going to make a difference in the next 20 years, then maybe we should look at it and do something about it. If not, forget it!

My other saying to people trying to make decisions was “90% of life is about cash flow and timing.” I never figured out the other 10% but realized that if there was enough cash to stay afloat, then the issue was about timing. That is, was it the right time or not?

Today our scripture from Mark’s Gospel is about my second truth: timing. The entire passage is all about timing. Be receptive today to hear what God is saying to us about timing.

Mark’s Gospel as you know is only 16 chapters versus Matthew at 28, Luke at 24, and John at 21. So Mark has an economy of vocabulary and says a lot in a few words.

Like in Mark 1:14: The time is that John has been arrested. John, as we read a couple of weeks ago, had been out in the wilderness preaching a Gospel of repentance. It was a message to be baptized for the remission of your sins. The setting of the wilderness is telling. The wilderness is desolate. People did not generally go out there. For some reason, a great crowd had gathered from Jerusalem in the wilderness to hear John.

What we miss is the radical message from John. He was preaching not to be submissive to the Roman government. While he was not plotting an insurrection as we witnessed a few weeks ago, he was preaching a way that was contrary to the current attitude in society. People followed closely the dictates of the Roman empire. They did not get out of line. And if they did get out of line, there were dire consequences.

Yet John was proclaiming to the people another way. Another life. Another reason for living. And word got out...and he was arrested for preaching against the government. Now he did not call out the government, but the message he proclaimed was clearly contrary to the rule of the land. His message was contradictory to the prevalent message of the day. Timing. He was arrested.

Then, Jesus came to Galilee after John was arrested. His coming fulfilled John’s prophecy, “the one coming after me, I am unworthy to untie his sandals.”

Notice what Mark says about Jesus, “Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” Not identical to John’s message, but even more radical.

John preached a repentance for forgiveness of sin...a different life than the one offered by the Roman Government. And, he died.

Jesus, however, preaching about a new and competing Kingdom, the Kingdom of God. And, he died.

It struck me this past week how radical Jesus’ message was. His preaching was in direct competition with the Roman Kingdom. His Kingdom was another Kingdom: The Kingdom of God. He was proposing a new world order. He was in competition with Rome and the Roman Government.

In terms of its radicalness to the norms of that day, Jesus was not unlike some of the radical groups in our day and time. People in extremist groups that are clamoring for your attention and devotion. And, my friends it is not just Isis or some subversive group overseas. It is groups right here in our own country that are vying for our attention and support.

I had to pause and think some about timing. We are always pulled and solicited and propagandized about various causes or various organizations. We get solicitations weekly in our mailboxes and almost every minute in our email inboxes.

People want us. They want our support. They want our attention. They want our allegiance.

The same is true of our Christian faith. Jesus is calling for our allegiance and our attention and our devotion. At some point, each of us has to decide where we stand. Each of us has to decide if we are for or against our faith. Each of us has to declare our allegiance.

And at some point, we have to realize that the Body of Christ is in competition with the society and government under which we live. I guess the radicalness of this message from Mark’s Gospel is how many of us declare that the church is not about “politics.” It should not have anything to do with politics or with societal issues.

Yet, when I read this passage, it is clear that we are being called to a lifestyle that is contrary to the lifestyle of the American way of life. In our society, it often is all about me, about mine, about what makes me happy, about what I want. That lifestyle is being challenged in the message of Jesus Christ. He is working against the principalities and powers of this world. And, fortunately or unfortunately, it is full of politics.

Which moves me to the next part of the passage. Jesus was preaching a radical message and then starts recruiting his disciples. Jesus is calling the disciples to this new way of life.

The story in versus 16-20 is our call story. Jesus went to the ordinary men doing their ordinary daily jobs of fishing. He called them to Follow Him.

Complete and opposite stand from the norms of that day. Do not follow Rome or the Roman government. No, follow me!

There are several things that stand out about these “call stories.” First of all, the immediacy of the call. Imagine the following:

1. You are working at your job at Wal*Mart and Jesus comes to you. You take off your Wal*Mart vest, made of 6 recyclable plastic bottles, and walk out the door. OR
2. You have a medical practice and one day Jesus comes to you while you are seeing a patient. You have an “ah ha!” moment, and you say to your patient, “excuse me for a moment.” You walk back to your office take off the white coat and walk out the back door. It will be 15-30 minutes before the nurses and the patients realize what has happened and that you are gone.

It is hard for us to imagine such responses. And, I’m not saying it could not happen, but would it not be rare. Or would it?

The urgency of our responding to the call of Jesus is immediate. Your heart says, ‘that’s it!’ I am going to do that. And it is that kind of immediate conviction that declares for you what you are about to do.

We know nothing about these fishermen. They were probably poor, worked hard, trying to keep body and soul together. Yet while out trolling in their boats, who knows what they were dreaming or thinking about. Who knows what level of dissatisfaction they had. Who knew what was at work in their hearts?

TIMING.

And then the right moment came, and the right words came from Jesus and they were convicted and committed. I’m sure you have had that kind of experience. When you had been stewing about something or someone. You had played out different scenarios of what to do and how you could act. And then the right words were said or you had a thought. Or you had a brainstorm and said, “That’s it!” All of our efforts and thoughts finally came together and, bingo, here is what God wants me to do.

TIMING. Waiting. Hearing. Responding.

2nd, look at the whole notion of calling. This passage, as I have said, is designated as the call stories of Jesus. Unfortunately, when we hear about being called, we automatically connect it with becoming a minister or a full-time church worker. I want us to debunk that notion right now.

As Presbyterians, we believe everyone is called. All of us have a calling. All of us are called by Christ.

As a kid, I went through a wonderful program of the Presbyterian Church, The Career and Personal Counseling Program. What are you going to be when you grow up? It helped young people seek and determine their vocation in life.

Vocation is the root word for calling. I would argue that all of us who call ourselves Christian have only one calling: to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I would label that call with a Capital “C.” We might have a number of different “callings,” lower case “c” in our lifetime, but there is only one calling, capital “C”.

It was helpful distinction when I realized that truth. I discovered the message in this passage was that Jesus was calling these men to follow him. He was not calling them to the vocation of being a fisherman. He was not calling them to be a carpenter. He was not calling them to be a stonemason.

No, first and foremost he was calling them and calling us to follow him. That is our calling regardless of our current and particular job. We are called to be a disciple and then exercise that calling in any particular job we might be a part of.

As part of the career counseling program I mentioned, I was blown away when someone said to me as a teenager that garbage men have a calling. That any vocation, any job can be a fulfillment of our calling to be a disciple of Christ.

I know I’ve worked in a number of jobs...and lived out my call as a disciple in each one of them:

- in college I delivered milk door to door in the summertime which meant getting up at 3 AM to go to work.
- on the college campus, I worked in the in the cafeteria washing dishes.
- in high school I worked before and after school for Mrs. Messer at Messer’s Grocery, a corner convenience store.
- after college I worked as Assistant Director for the Lauren’s County Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) agency and even was the Head Start Director for eight months.

I lived out my calling like the disciples did in each of these venues. I had various experiences that ultimately contributed to my lifelong work as a pastor.

Haven’t we all done that? Had various jobs, but only one calling? Had various jobs in which we lived out our faith. Had various jobs - - some we abhorred and others we loved - - that contributed to our calling as a disciple of Christ. There is one calling yet numerous ways to live out that calling.

I end where I began and do not want to make you uncomfortable. However, if you were called like these disciples, you are responding to Jesus’ proclamation, “The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news.”

Which means you have faith in God, not in the world. You have faith that God is just and not manipulative. You have faith that God cares for all people not just our kind. You have faith that your allegiance is with God’s Kingdom and not with the American Kingdom.

This calling means you have decided that God’s Kingdom is your Kingdom. That you walk to a different drummer. That you will work to make a difference in the world. That you will endeavor to accept all people as God’s people. That you will pray for your enemies. That you will love people who do

not love you back. That you will work for justice even when our government or our judicial system is not just.

It is a tall order. And I think this passage is so on timely for us and our country. We are a divided people. And Jesus is calling us as a country to repent. As a nation, to declare we have too easily taken sides instead of seeking the truth. He is declaring we need to repent of our resentments, of our hatred, of our taking sides, of our trying to outdo others.

And then maybe we might be able to live out our calling...for we will be swimming against the tide. And some people will not be pleased when we do not take their side. But then we will be living out our calling as Christ's disciples, subversives that we are!

Is it your time? It is all about timing. Is God nudging you to express your calling as a disciple in a new and different way? Is God at work in your heart and is it time you gave up everything and responded to his calling? Is it your time? God thinks it is!