

Third Sunday after Epiphany January 22, 2012
Mark 1: 14-20 “Repent and Believe the Good News”
Ken Thomas, VST Student

I spent Friday and Saturday at Epiphany Explorations in Victoria listening to Richard Rohrbaugh, which was great. I finished my sermon on Thursday so I could do that, and then after listening to Rohrbaugh, I got home last night and wanted to change everything. So if this sounds like mindless rambling, that’s why.

Jackie and I drove back from Winnipeg, and arrived a few days before classes started. We had free time, a car and nice weather. So one day we went over to this lovely little place, Deep Cove on the North Shore. On the way we stopped at a park and walked down to the water. You can all imagine the scene. Sun and a little cloud in the sky, blue water, waves lapping up on the shore, sea gulls flying around, with that unmistakable squawk. It was cool and smelled fresh.

Around the fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee it was likely hot and smelled like fish, but not that day at Deep Cove. There were two men at the far end of the wharf, one was fishing with a line, and the other seemed to be hauling in some kind of a net. So I walked down the wharf, and because I don’t know what you fish for at a place like that, certainly not freshwater fish like we have in Manitoba, I asked them what they were fishing for. One said anything that bites, likely herring, and the one with the nets said crabs, but complained everything he was catching was too small. I noticed the gulls were eating shellfish and didn’t seem to be worried about the size. We stood on the wharf and chatted about the weather for a minute.

So – “Repent – believe in the good news and come after me.” I didn’t say that to the fishermen on the wharf. I am going back to the Vancouver School of Theology, so “come after me”. This is not quite up there with “I will make you fishers of people”. Maybe eventually, but you just can’t say – OK I will follow, so give me my degree already. This story is set before we had gospels and letters of Paul we had to study.

But, this is what the story describes – walking up to strange men and saying “repent, believe the good news, come and follow me.” That is exactly what Mark is describing here, and Matthew too. Luke can’t have this in his gospel. He has a long narrative about Jesus preaching from Simon and Andrew’s boat and a miraculous catch of fish, followed by Simon kneeling before Jesus. And John, as usual, has his own story about how they follow Jesus after hearing testimony about him from John the Baptist, who is not yet arrested but still active, at a place several days journey from Galilee.

Mark has no detail, no background or lead in. Just the bare facts – he called – they came, immediately. He doesn’t tell us what Zebedee thought of this, either. But he doesn’t have to. He is not writing for our time. In the culture of that time and place a father’s reaction does not need to be described, and in Mark, this is about as positive a portrayal of the disciples as we get. In Mark, the disciples are all cowardly and dense,

who are never redeemed, even Peter. But here they hear the call and follow, even though they are not clear where they are going.

Let's start by getting clear about what is at stake here. In the context of ancient Mediterranean culture they had no concept equivalent to the supra-individualistic culture of modern North America. Theirs was a collective based society. If you ask me today – “Who are you?” My answer is “Ken Thomas, VST student”; used to be “Ken Thomas, Professional Accountant and Fleet Manager”, maybe someday it will be “Ken Thomas, Minister”. Who I am is defined by what I do, and that likely tells you a lot about me, my education, my economic status, my social rank, although we don't put much into that these days.

If I was asked in first century Palestine, “Who are you?” “I am Ken Thomas, of Brandon, son of Ivan, son of Henry”. And depending on the rank of Brandon as a village, and the place of the Thomases in Brandon, my rank and honour, in a honour/shame society, is established. It defines my life, my work, who I can eat with, whether I can look you in the eye when I talk to you. Village and family are not important things. Rather, they are the only important thing, perhaps more important than life itself.

Now Zebedee is no ordinary fisherman, he has his own boats and hired men. The sons of Zebedee are no mere peasants. They are not walking away from the family business. They are leaving who they are, their place in society, committing the unthinkable act of leaving their family to join a new family built around an itinerant preacher proclaiming repentance and good news. And they don't know where they are going.

About the only group around today like this is the Occupy Movement. They have that effect of calling out people to join, that kind of following without really knowing where they are going. I have great sympathy, especially with the initial movement on Wall Street; just of course it can't work, can it? They don't have any leadership, and they offer no promise, but a protest against an unjust distribution of resources and a call to find a better way. Yet even in their strange and, for many, highly offensive actions, they call out a hope, a longing that there is a better way, if we could just find it. They are right, but they may be looking in all the wrong places; they certainly will not find it in the places where people profit from the status quo.

The Occupy Movement is about as muddy as the place and role of John the Baptist in the gospels. Mark, by starting the account of the ministry of Jesus after the arrest of John, wants us to be clear that what John was doing is over – and something radically new is about to begin. But the connections remain close. John the Baptist preached repentance and Jesus continues that theme. The Greek word used here literally means “change of mind”, but the Hebrews put great strength in that concept. For them repent meant –“to return to God.”

We tend to think of the term *repent* as meaning a primarily human decision that begins a process of moral reform, but that doesn't quite get it. One commentary I read

said it means a turning away from one's previous way of life, which was determined by particular sets of convictions, practices and social affiliations. And in the New Testament context it means a turning towards and acceptance of the new divine initiative through the agency of Jesus. For the author and early audiences of Mark, this turning and adherence to Jesus and his message have already led to involvement in a new set of convictions, practices and social affiliations, as they describe in the story of these disciples.

This is the repentance that leads to the obedient surrender to Christ. This is what the disciples show in these acts. They don't know where they are going but they follow and trust and believe. In part because there is not just a call, but a promise – "I will make you fishers of people." They are not only called, they will also be sent, on a mission. But there is also the man himself, the presence, which elicits this response. And for us as Christians, that is the centre of the story, the presence of God in human flesh. But we don't get to meet him like that, do we?

This is the genius of Mark. His story is written for us. We do not get to have Jesus sit in our boat and catch us miraculous amounts of fish. We simply get a call. And then we choose, do we follow or not. And the problem is we don't have any more idea than the four disciples did where this journey will take us. But we do have the witness of the saints, then and now, who tell us the journey is the right one.

John Wesley preached a sermon on repentance using this text. For Wesley, there is more than one kind of repentance. There is the kind we usually think of, stop doing immoral things and shape up, repent and sin no more. This is a kind of conversion repentance or the beginning of faith.

But Wesley stressed that the more important, the deeper kind of repentance, came later. He is referring to the repentance that comes in the midst of our believing that now we are saved by Jesus, everything is just fine. It is the repentance from the assumption that now we have faith we can do good things, achieve great things, live holy lives, all on our own. Wesley preached – "By the same faith we feel the power of Christ every moment resting upon us, whereby alone we are what we are, whereby we are enabled to continue in spiritual life, and without which, notwithstanding all our present holiness, we should be devils the next moment." And that is not just about being immoral, that is about placing our trust in ourselves not God. But not us. Surely he must be thinking about somebody else.

Actually, it is exactly us, especially us. Today, when we call people to follow Jesus, we want them to join a committee, not repent. Frederick Herzog, a well know American liberation theologian and civil rights activist, said that the efforts of liberal Protestantism have been mainly ineffective because they are not grounded in the Word of Christ. We are not into that stuff about repentance and surrender. We are about self-reliance, independence and exercising our rights. We don't talk about obedience and self-emptying. Instead we idolize self-actualization and freedom. Even when we are

extolling the values and virtues of the social gospel, we are the fixers. It is up to us to fix things, to make things right, to beat the system and overcome the bad guys.

Bonhoeffer talked about “costly grace”, as opposed to what he called “cheap grace”. Cheap grace is the easy assurance that God loves you and you are fine, and nothing is required of you that takes you beyond your comfort zone. Costly grace, powerful grace, deep grace, is the grace that is found in discipleship, in the willingness to risk, to trust God, to act without knowing the result. The similarities with our current situation are pretty obvious. That which we knew and trusted is passing away and something new is being called into being. Costly grace is what you find when you leave aside the family business, leave aside your very identity and find a new identity in the radical call to come after Christ, to be part of a new thing that God is doing in our midst.

And Jesus simply offers an invitation. There is no threat of damnation, no guilt, no *you ought to*, no condemnation of anyone; just an offer and an invitation. But this is an invitation that you don’t accept just once. Every morning you have to decide again, am I going to believe today in the call of Jesus upon my life, repent, return to God, today. But first you might wish to listen to the news. Then ask yourself, am I going to believe in the call of Christ upon my life today.

Of course for us, one of the biggest concerns is the state of our church, indeed the state of Christendom, the end of Christendom as we speak of it. And it is immediate, in the financial problems of VST, and in the struggle with the looming finiteness of the congregations of the west side, and most of our congregations across our country.

But in Christ, who entices us with his promise, there is yet hope. Christianity is growing fast in the southern hemisphere, just not here. God is doing something new in our time. The story of the calling of the disciples is written by an author who knows the end of the story; at least that story that is set in first century Palestine. And we read it as those who know the end of the story. Except the story isn’t ended yet. We don’t worship or do church the way early Christians did, and future Christians won’t worship or do church like us, and that is OK.

God is doing a new thing in our time, and it is both death and new life. We must choose which way will we go. God’s promise to make all things new is being fulfilled as we live today and is also still yet to come. And Jesus still calls us from our nets. It is a call to follow. It is a call to repentance, deep repentance. But it is a call of hope. The story of the call of Christ is as powerful today as it was when Mark wrote his gospel, not because we are clever enough to make the story relevant to our time, but because every time, including ours, fits this timeless story. Amen.