

*Jonah 3: 1 - 5, 10*

*Psalms 62: 5 - 12*

Year B, Third Sunday after the Epiphany

*1 Corinthians 7: 29 - 31*

*Mark 1: 14 - 20*

January 25, 2009

*White Fire*

The Gospel of Mark is always in a hurry. From the moment Jesus emerges from the waters of his baptism, he rushes from calling to teaching to healing, hurried along by Mark's use of the word "immediately". As we walk with the Gospel of Mark in 2009, we will note that the word "immediately" comes up in virtually every passage and even more than one time in many of them. Jesus' ministry pushes, rushes, yearns for a conclusion in this gospel. As a result, Mark is the shortest of the four gospels and skips over almost every detail. If Mark were a journalist, he would be fired for a total lack of information by our modern standards. In many ways, Mark is just like Detective Joe Friday on the old *Dragnet* series, "Just the facts, ma'am."

Today's reading is a perfect example of this tendency. Mark tells us that John was arrested and Jesus began preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." I guarantee you that Christ's sermons were longer than reported here. We get no record of who was present and listening, the response to such a message, or even the number of those following. We just move on quickly to the most sparse and frustrating call stories in scripture. Jesus appears to be just walking by the Sea of Galilee, sees Peter and Andrew fishing, and says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." With no other prompting, questions or discussion, the two brothers drop everything and follow Jesus. They do all of this "immediately". Jesus keeps on walking and "immediately" repeats his call and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, leave their dad and a profitable business with other employees to follow Christ.

These stories of being called to ministry by Jesus are completely terrifying because we know absolutely nothing else. Mark does not tell us if the fishing business was particularly bad that year with a forecast for diminishing catches in the next few years. We do not know if these four men knew Jesus previously from the local synagogue. We do not know if they knew this itinerant rabbi or met him for the first time that morning. We are not told if Jesus was glowing or walking on the water or said something else that gave Peter, Andrew, James and John a great reason to follow. I would really like to know how this part of the calling people works. I think that information would be incredibly helpful because, let me tell you, when I call people to help with a committee or serve on a board or even just bring a dessert for a reception, I tend to get a hundred follow-up questions. I would love to know what look or tone of voice to use where I come up with a phrase like, "Come and I will make you committee with people." That is not too clever. Maybe it is all in the turn of phrase.

Luke understands this psychological problem of motive. In his gospel, Jesus goes out on the boat with Peter and Andrew. He preaches for a few minutes (giving the brothers some time to hear the new gospel message) and then asks them to lower their nets into the water. The result is a miraculous catch that breaks their nets and swamps their boats. Now there is a story that helps with motivation amid call. We know why they follow in that story.

Mark's paucity of language scares many people. Personally, I have been worried greatly by more than a few sermons about going when God calls and not asking any questions. Talk about a tough road to walk! I think I could follow Jesus to death but I would really like to ask him some questions and chat on the road to Calvary. Something about this lack of information does one of

two things: we either try to follow without question or are invited into the story in a very different way.

I took a powerful class in seminary called Midrash. The course covered the ancient Jewish tradition of wrestling with scripture. Often we have large portions of text that are difficult to understand. In Judaism, there is a long tradition of arguing legal points and telling stories to seek the truth of the scripture. At one point in that class, we talk about the concept that between every line of Torah is white fire. The idea is that God's truth and teaching in this world does not end simply and completely with the written text. Instead, we must wrestle with the truth between all of those lines. Between every line of Torah is a white fire.

The Gospel of Mark is set ablaze by that very white fire. The idea is not that we can go around adding whatever we like to the written narrative of Jesus. The invitation is to find our way into the gospel story. If we are sitting in that boat lowering our net into dark waters, waiting for a catch, what would it take for us to hear Jesus' call? What would it take for us to drop our nets and follow? Would we need the miracle? Would we need to hear a longer proclamation of the gospel? Would we only need to see him to know all is well in this world and the next? What would it take for us to follow as those four apostles followed? Finding that truth is warming our souls by God's white fire. We are engaging and wrestling with scripture in ways that change us, encourage us, and strengthen us for the journey ahead.

Between every line of Torah, of scripture is white fire. In engaging and worrying over and trying to understand how those four old souls followed and how we could follow, we slowly begin to realize that Christ is still calling us. With little idea of exactly what we are supposed to always do, Jesus calls us through that white fire. We are called to warm ourselves in the light of a God

calling each and every person in this room to a life of ministry and love. The church has often confused the idea of a call with the priesthood. Nothing can be farther from the truth. We are all called at our baptism to be a part of Jesus' life and ministry. We are called again and again in scripture to be God's hands and voice in this world. We are called out of a great white fire to engage and struggle with that faith in a thousand different ways, every single day. And yes, my friends, as a member of this parish, you are even called to ministry within committees and boards and hospital visits and baking cookies. The white fire that burns brightly between each and every line of scripture invites us to express God's love and call to us. Mark's quick and immediate story can be frustrating because it tells us so little about exactly how everything happened when Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John. We have so little information about how everything happened. Yet, we discover that those stories can become our stories. Between those lines we can hear God calling us, from the midst of a warm, white fire.

Amen.