

North Kildonan United Church

24th January 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Believe in the Good News”

Jonah 5: 1-5, 10

Psalms 62: 5-12

Mark 1: 14-20

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

What does it mean to be a fisherman, especially if you come from a long line of fisher folk? Not just a second or third generation fisherman but what if you belonged to a family that has made its living from the sea for ten or more generations.

I would think there would be a sense of security in that profession, certainly a sense of history and pride and much knowledge passed down through the years, through the generations. Your boat may date back to your great-grandfather's time, nets perhaps more recently. As you start in the family business you'll learn about tying ropes and repairing sails, of the best places to cast your nets and the ideal times to do that. The stories of past adventures would be shared, fish stories of the ones that got away and the others that were so large they were a challenge to haul aboard.

There would be honour in being a member of this family profession, a dignity to the work which captures so much food for so many people to buy at the local market. Sure the seas could be rough, very rough at times, and the weather fair one moment then foul the next. There was always a sense of danger when on the water, danger of an accident, of sinking, of falling overboard, of the net breaking and losing the catch. And always hard labour.

A stable job, being part of a family business, always a demand for the fish caught, who could ask for more? So thought Andrew, we might imagine.

Then one day, as Andrew might later tell it, this young prophet from Nazareth comes wandering along the Sea of Galilee. Sure there have been other so called prophets preaching their version of what they think is good news but their words never quite seemed right. Some called for rebellion against the Romans, but what chance do ordinary folk have against trained soldiers, soldiers with carefully crafted weapons and no hesitation to crucify civilians. Other prophets might preach a message of retreat and isolation, abandoning the ways of the world, rejecting the joys of the world and ignoring the needs of the world.

But this prophet was different. His message was different. It was compassionate and loving, real and true in a way well beyond the messages of those other prophets. It was as though the wisdom and depth of the prophets of old had come to life in this carpenter's son.

He talked about good news, news that was not a thinly disguised political slogan or another manipulation by religious authorities. Good news he called it, based on the kingdom of God. Oh yes, the kingdom of God, we would discover what that meant as time went on.

So here we are, Simon who would be renamed Peter, and Andrew, busy with the daily catch, hoping for nothing more than a full net, though deep down we were ready for far more than that. I guess we were ready for adventure, for being involved with something far greater than our current situation. Little did we know what that adventure would become.

This man, Jesus, he called himself, shouted out to us that we could do more than catch fish. If we followed him, we would fish for people. What an odd thing to say, yet both of us felt compelled to drop our nets and follow him. We figured we can always go back to the family business if this doesn't pan out.

Then, and this is the amazing part, Jesus went a bit further along the shore and called out to Zebedee's sons, James and John, inviting them to follow him as well. What old Zebedee thought of his sons wandering off with this Jesus we never really found out, but the expression on his face said volumes.

So here we were, the four of us, excellent fishermen but not much skill beyond that, wondering what we have got ourselves into, yet at the same time having this feeling, deep inside us, that we were meant to follow this Jesus. And little did we know how life changing, how life enriching, this journey with Jesus would turn out.

If only we had Andrew's account of that first meeting with Jesus. But we don't, though down through the centuries and in our present day the story of these first disciples is played out around the world. To this day people find the story of Jesus, the reality of Jesus, the truth of Jesus so compelling that they abandon all, their families, their livelihoods, their possessions, to follow Jesus.

I would hope that these modern day disciples would take some time to discern what their religious vocation might look like, for their sake and for the sake of those who love them.

But in Mark's gospel there doesn't seem to be the time for careful discernment, time for meetings with an education and students committee, of becoming a candidate for ministry within a congregation, of internships in different places, of a thorough academic training and perhaps psychological explorations. Nope, in Mark everything is **immediately!**

Throughout the gospel of Mark we detect an urgency that shapes the gospel into these quick, immediate decisions on what are actually life altering acts. Perhaps Mark didn't have the luxury of time, of carefully and gently persuading disciples of Jesus to join him. Perhaps Mark's own life situation was influencing how he recorded the words and deeds of Jesus.

What do we know of Mark, or the writers of Mark if they were more than one person, and of the times in which he or they lived? Scholarship suggests Mark was a Greek speaking Roman, writing between 65 and 70 AD. What was going on in Mark's world during that time period?

Imagine, if you will, it is 1943, and Mark is a Jew in Nazi occupied Europe. He is trying to record the teachings of a great resistance leader who had been brutally killed by the occupiers of his country. This leader had managed to inspire many others to a different way of living and treating people, a way of life founded on love and compassion, justice and forgiveness. The message this martyred leader preached had the power to undermine the oppressor by transforming the hearts and minds of the people, a threat that needed to be eliminated.

The oppressor knew that the followers of this leader needed to be silenced as well. Our modern day Mark desperately wanted to preserve and share the words of this great leader, but he also knew how much danger he was in by recording these revolutionary yet hopeful words. He didn't have the luxury of sitting by a riverbank, or in the study of comfortable home, carefully contemplating what to say about the leader, crafting and recrafting and embellishing each sentence until it was perfect. His work was more like the CBC's Matthew Halton broadcasting from war-torn Europe in the 40s. Terse, short, concise sentences, well-chosen words that would briefly yet effectively describe the scene before him.

In a sense, Mark was a war correspondent, and the battleground, if you will, was the hearts and minds of those open to receiving the good news of Jesus Christ. But the world around him was literally a battleground as well. The Jewish revolt against Roman rule led to countless deaths, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the complete overturning of Jewish life. In addition, the fledgling Christian movement was under great persecution from the Roman authorities, the cruel, Nazi-like occupiers of many lands. Christians had to gather and worship in secret. For instance, Christians worshipped in the comparative safety of the catacombs of Rome, surrounded by the bones and decaying corpses of the dead. If Mark had been caught, his writings would have been destroyed and there would have been a cross waiting for his body to be nailed to it. Desperate times needing a liberating, hopeful message, a word of truth amongst so many lies.

Where did Mark get his material about Jesus? He had heard the stories of Jesus, the memories his followers had, and chief amongst those followers was Peter. By the early years of the second century a scholar had declared Mark as Peter's interpreter, the recorder of Peter's understanding of Jesus. In 64 AD, just a year before we believe Mark began his writing, Peter had been martyred by the Romans, one of how many Christians put to death for their faith. And remember, Peter was very, very close to Jesus, even though he continually misunderstood Jesus.

Keeping in mind the violence of the times, when for example Emperor Nero would tie Christians to stakes around the Colosseum and burn them alive while Roman citizens watched late-night chariot races, or Christians would be left to fend for themselves in that same Colosseum as wild beasts tore them apart, or when Christians were arrested for belief in Jesus and made slaves, keeping all that in mind, it is no surprise that Mark's gospel is brief and concise and urgent in its message. With danger around every corner, there was no room, or patience, for stories of shepherds abiding in the fields by night, or angelic choirs in the skies, or strange yet luxurious gifts from equally strange men from the East. Mark's time is a time of war and upset, a time of urgency and commitment, a time that so deeply needs a word of love and compassion and grace.

Into such a world, a world that has never really left us, especially in these pandemic times, Mark offers us Jesus Christ, the hope of the world, who gently but firmly invites all who will listen: *"Follow me and I will make you fish for people."*

And so, the adventure continues. We are just at the beginning of the Gospel according to Mark.

Amen.