

God is So Close...
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 24, 2021

Please Read:
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Mark 1:14-20

It's been quite a week, beginning with our service remembering the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., followed by the inauguration of a new President and Madam Vice President, the first woman and first woman of African American descent as well as South Asian descent to hold such high office. I was particularly awed by Amanda Gorman's, "The Hill We Climb..." a 723-word poem she wrote expressly for the inauguration and, in her words, "*to envision a way in which our country can still come together and can still heal.*" Memorable were her lines,

And so, we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us. We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside. We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another. We seek harm to none and harmony for all. Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true. That even as we grieved, we grew. That even as we hurt, we hoped; that even as we tired, we tried; that we'll forever be tied together, victorious. Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow division.¹

This young prophet reminded us matter-of-factly that we have a hill to climb together... It was, after all, only two and a half weeks ago when our capitol was invaded by fringe elements waving White nationalist flags, calling for the hanging of our vice president and defiling the offices of our elected leaders. Washington was not filled with adoring crowds for the inauguration but crowded with National Guards to keep the peace.

Did you notice how our Gospel text begins? "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God..." Mark begins with a subtle detail, a mere mention of the arrest of John the Baptist. It may seem like a throw-away line, but it is absolutely key to understanding Jesus' ministry. He, Jesus, was never in a safe zone. The mission which Jesus launched is full of peril in the context of dangerous and opposing forces. John has been arrested. Soon he will be dead, his head on a platter.

This is what literary critics call *foreshadowing*. John is the forerunner, and *You Know Who* will be next. And if they do that to John, then Jesus, who knows what they will do to their disciples? So, from the very beginning when we start talking about the Kingdom of God, about the reign of God, about God coming so close, it's actually a warning... You had better think this whole discipleship thing over again carefully.

"If you want to follow Jesus," remarked the activist priest Daniel Berigan, "you had better look good on wood." That's what Jesus was calling people to do. "Pick up your... What?" "Pick up your *cross* and follow me."

You never know what this God will call you to do: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love..." "Arise, go to Ninevah, that great city, and cry against it." "You lack one thing; go sell what you have, and give to the poor..." "Love your *enemy*..." "Pray

¹ Referenced January 22, 2021 on-line: <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-0121-gorman-transcript-20210120-5ojxjfrfb5cybjabhgiffgiyhi-story.html>

for those who persecute you.” “Turn the other cheek.” “Forgive as you have been forgiven.”

Reason provides plenty of excuses to avoid the cost of discipleship with Jesus, the cost of risking more of your life and your budget to be Christ's ambassadors.

But Jesus preached, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent..., believe...Follow me!”

The ordering of Jesus declaratives and imperatives is important. The time is fulfilled. In the New Testament, there are two important Greek words used for “time.” One is *chronos* from which we get chronology - years, months, days, calendars, clocks, the steady, predictable tick-tock of time. That's where most of us live for most of our lives. Waiting for the Zoom meeting to start, going to work, doing the shopping, making deadlines, picking up the kids from school, cleaning the house, waking up to the alarm. Mending the nets... Tomorrow, and the next day, and the next...

The other word for time is *kairos*, which means special time, the right time, a time in which your whole life is caught up in a moment, everything crystallizes, and all hinges on whether you say yes immediately, or no immediately. Not tomorrow, not when you're emotionally comfortable with the idea, not after you've done a comprehensive risk analysis, surveys, and figured out all the options... but now. Immediately. Jesus says, “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; Follow me...”

In that declaration is the grace of the good news: God’s presence, God’s Kingdom, God’s reign of love, has come near. In fact, for those first disciples, they were staring right into the face of God. God comes so close to us in so many surprising and unexpected ways. I confess it felt like God was present as I listened to the prayers, the poetry, and Garth Brooks inviting the whole country to sing Amazing Grace. *That* was something like God coming very close...

So, it’s in this context of God’s nearness and love for us that Jesus calls us to repent, to change our way of thinking, to believe, to trust that God is still sovereign and gracious, that God is doing a new thing and that *we don’t want to miss this...* Kairos time is both urgent and important, and God wants us to be a part of it...

"And passing along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew... casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And *immediately* they left their nets and followed him."

Biblical scholars call this, particularly as it occurs in Mark, “telescoping.” Probably, Mark has telescoped events that occurred over days, even weeks, into a moment. Jesus probably spent hours arguing his point with these fishermen. They probably debated among themselves. All of the new member classes, the website overhauls, the congregational meetings, the information packets, the question-and-answer forums, their discernment, and final determination to sign up and become part of the Jesus movement - all of that is omitted, telescoped into a few verses. It's just an outline: a sketch at best, a case of primitive narrative at worst.

Some of you will recognize a typical dinner conversation. "So, how was your day?" ... "It was fine." Maybe this is just how leaders talk. Mr. Caesar, how was Gaul? "I came. I saw. I conquered."

In fact, I'm sure some of you wished us preachers could better telescope our sermons! I still haven't learned that lesson from homiletics class where we were instructed: Have a really catchy introduction and a really inspiring conclusion, then keep the middle between the two as brief as possible! It's hard for me to address a topic without examining all the implications and ramifications. Last week I talked about how even a simple concept like justice is really complicated. You think I'm going to leave a text like this with some fisherman, Jesus, and "Follow me?"

But here is what's interesting about how Mark sets this up... He doesn't really care about the whys and wherefores, about the long conversations that likely led up to the disciples' decision, or about their psychological profiles that prepared them for their decision, or even about their aspirations and hopes for the coming Kingdom of God...

In about five verses Mark disposes of an account of how four fishermen drop everything and follow Jesus on the basis of a less than a dozen-word invitation *to fish for people*. And here's the real shocker... It was these fishermen who would understand that once you catch a fish, it dies. Have you ever thought about that? Yes, Jesus is calling his followers to die to the old ways of living, to the performative, productive, perfunctory, and peripatetic life of pathos, to a life of passion and purpose, paying attention to the presence of God right here and now...

In our wildest imaginations, most of us cannot imagine that it is possible to leave everything and to follow Jesus on the basis of a simple invitation and promise like that. We are not simple taciturn, uncomplicated folks like those first disciples. We are complex, educated people, who have portfolios, responsibilities, families, careers, mortgages, taxes, *complications*. We are not apt to drop everything and run off after some itinerant preacher who announces *the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is now*.

No, we are Presbyterians. We send it to committee for discussion, meetings, and studies. We will weigh all possible options, do research, clarify our values, and do extensive cost-benefit analyses. Call for a professional opinion. We'll have therapy to be sure that we are responding out of careful weighing of all the facts rather than out of our poor relationship with our parents or sibling rivalry. We have spent too many years educating and cultivating ourselves to be rational, balanced, well-adjusted people to change the direction of our lives on mere impulse...

But of course, once we do all that, Jesus has likely moved on to another town. We missed him. But at least we have not behaved impulsively, made decisions out of passion rather than reason. We've honored the process. The most exhaustive process we could devise. Education, money, sophistication, complications, control does that...And back to the nets we go!

In 2018, two Dutch economists analyzed a poll of 27,000 workers in 37 countries. A full 25% of all those surveyed doubt the importance of their work...² What if those disciples were in that self-aware group and *what if their calling happened exactly the way Mark tells it?* What if their following Jesus was a decision of the moment, based on some mysterious act of clarifying passion without adequate information, without careful consideration of alternatives? “And they immediately followed him... And immediately he called them; and they left their father...and followed him.”

Perhaps what Mark is saying, in this terse, staccato account, is that this is the way Jesus gets followed - as an act of trust, without all the facts, stumbling after an enigmatic figure whom we hardly even know, much less where he is going. Maybe this is part of what it means to repent and believe?

I'll let you ponder that... Just don't take too long. Because I don't want you to miss the experience of God coming so close, with healing and promise, with strength and confidence for you to live forward into a new day, a new reign, a new future and to face the hill we climb with renewed enthusiasm and hope!

I love another line near the end of Miss Gorman's poem, “But one thing is certain, if we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our legacy, and change our children's birthright.”³

That's what Jesus' call is about: Change. Mighty mercy. The legacy of Love. Now. He's calling. Will you follow? Will you repent and believe God is so close? In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

² Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 2019), 293. *The quarter who doubted the importance of their work were in the private sector: banks, law firms and ad agencies!*

³ Referenced January 22, 2021 on-line: <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-0121-gorman-transcript-20210120-5ojxjfrfb5cybjabhgiffgiyhi-story.html>