

Leaving Their Nets

Mark 1:14-20

Hillary Brownsmith

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When faced with a passage like this, it's hard not to jump to this banal preface: "Now we have heard this story so often that we have forgotten what this story is really about."

This intro works for the resurrection, the birth of Christ, and a myriad of other stories in the New and Old Testament. Maybe that intro works for this passage from Mark. But I also think it's possible to introduce this story by saying, "We have heard this story so often but we haven't heard this story in its full strength because so few people want to do this dangerous text justice."

There are many ways one can fail to do justice to the Christian story. One of those forms of theological malpractice is making the text all about exclusionary rules that keep certain people out of church or the pulpit. But more commonly the damage done to this message seems harmless. People spiritualize certain messages and engage in surface level, de-contextualized analysis. This isn't a problem we really struggle with here at the Circle but most of us grew up in congregations where this was an issue. When I sat down to work on this sermon, I had to wade through all the weak readings of the revolutionary outset of Christ's ministry. I had to remember that this story is not just about "stepping out on faith" as I have often heard it read. It's not a story about the sanctity of work or Jesus' love for the laborer. This isn't even a story about sacrificing it all to follow Jesus. Those are lovely ideas. But I am not sure they are the ideas that this story is meant to convey.

This is a story about power. All stories are really about power right...economic power, spiritual power, sexual power, emotional power, physical power, power redistributed ethically and accordingly, or power concentrated and abused. On its face, this is not a story about power. But if the Bible is, as a whole, a tale of liberation then it must also be a story about the precariousness of certain powers. And these powers are questioned again and again in ways we no longer recognize. So this story of calling the first disciples is the perfect place for the writer of Mark to name Jesus's relationship to power and thusly what must become his followers' relationship to power, our relationship to power.

In the previous passage, Jesus has spent 40 days in the desert battling the temptations of the great divider. During this episode, the book of Matthew notes that the divider calls Jesus to test God twice and then the tempter offers Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" for a mere bow and a prayer. I assume Jesus rejected the offer not because the tempter couldn't make good on the offer but because what Jesus is interested in isn't the kingdoms.

When Jesus leaves the desert, he discovers that his cousin John has been jailed. John who goes into the desert, eats locusts, the protein of the poor, and shirks every

customary, civilized behavior only to be murdered so his head can be used as a party favor for a spoiled aristocrat.

Knowing that John is in prison and that the kingdoms of the world are in Satan's control to keep or give away, Jesus walks into Galilee and begins the work of calling disciples. Before he calls a single person, he has turned the rule that the student must seek the teacher on its head. Rabbis didn't look for students just as professors today don't go looking for people to fill desks. But Jesus is demonstrating a new power dynamic. So he heads to Capernaum. Why Capernaum? Because Capernaum is a fishing village. Don't get too fixated on the "I will make you fishers of men" verse. Jesus didn't go to a fishing village just for the metaphor. Fishing was a highly regulated industry in Jesus's time. Over the past week or so I have been reading a lot about Roman taxation of wholesale fishing because I know how to have a good time. No, I have been studying this stuff because understanding the economic climate for James, John, Andrew, Simon and Levi is really important to understanding their call to be disciples.

The average fisherman in Jesus' time was taxed about 30%. Now these were people who would've been living at a nearly subsistence level to begin with so a 30% tax is pretty steep. And 30% is really just a guide. The Roman elite expect a certain return but they aren't going to be investigating low level tax collectors for fraud; the rate may have been higher depending on how greedy the local tax collector was. Most fishermen were renting boats and harbor space so they were paying fees on those things. All fishermen were expected to hold a fishing license which wasn't free. And most boats could seat 10 so if the family didn't have 10 members they would need to hire some people. At the time, game wardens made the rounds to make sure that fishing licenses were current and fishermen were trading with state-approved middlemen who processed fish. Toll booths were established by the state to make sure somebody was always watching for tax evaders. Levi, also called Matthew, is called into discipleship out of one of the tollbooths that had been established in Capernaum. These fishermen had no representation in government, the economy was constructed in such a way that they would never have a surplus, and they would never progress to a different station in life. James, John, Andrew, and Simon were not good blue collar workers plying the family trade. They were stuck in an oppressive economic system created to benefit a tiny fraction of the people. All those schools and infrastructure for which the Romans are known, these fishermen never experienced any of that. Those developments were built with the money collected from poor people for the benefit of the very wealthy.

Y'all if we did as much work to point out anachronism in readings of the Bible as we did to point out anachronism in Downton Abbey, historical biblical scholars would be out of a job. We need this background to know why the first four disciples are willing to just leave their nets. As Jesus comes into Galilee, he says "the kingdom of God is at hand". He proclaims the coming reign of God in the midst of family imprisonment and the persistent work of evil. And when he shows up to recruit the fishermen to discipleship they have heard about this message, they have heard that the reign of God is at hand and they hear the unspoken word within that message. They hear that the anti-reign is almost over. When Jesus asks them to leave their job and the government the taxation

of that drudgery upholds, they don't "sacrifice it all". They don't have all of anything. When they lay down their nets they are laying down their chains. They are following Christ with the expectation that they will be part of a new order in which they are treated with dignity.

Throughout the book of Mark, we are shown that these first disciples don't quite get what the new kingdom will look like. This becomes really clear after Jesus foretold his death a third time and James and John ask Jesus to sit at his right and left hand. Jesus reminds them that Gentiles are the ones who let rulers lord over them. That even he, the Son of Man, came not to be served but to serve. The new reign is so different, so counter to the kingdoms and power structures of this world that even though Jesus explains and demonstrates it over and over again, the disciples never catch on.

Still this is who Jesus draws close. These are the men he calls first...four men who know how rotten the system is. These guys do not have to be convinced that the Roman Empire has nothing to offer. They don't make the argument that maybe Herod is the problem and if there was just another guy in office things would be different. They know that the system is deadly because it is killing them.

Knowing that there are folks in our congregation who are experiencing a lot of pain and knowing that there is so much strife and suffering in the world at this moment, I did wonder about the appropriateness of spending time on the history of fishing when maybe a more spiritual reading of this passage would feel better. But then I realized that's such a false dichotomy...deep historical reading vs. a reading that offers spiritual guidance and comfort. Sure a good thorough reading is different than mishandling the text to get an inspirational message. But to know the texts more deeply is to have more answers about the texture and shape of our own lives. Part of what we learn from the calling of the first disciples is that when you don't have anything else, the risk of believing that the kingdom of God is at hand and acting accordingly is actually smaller. This book, this story rightly read is a tough read for comfortable people, for people who can be offered something by the powers. This book is a consolation for heartbroken people. When you're family is in crisis or you're confused about vocation or you're experiencing an illness that is changing how you have to interact with your loved ones and the world around you, the old earthly standbys don't have a lot to offer in the way of newness and hope. In these difficult moments, it is easier to believe the truth of this hard word because you need it to be true. The anti-reign, the reign that represents destruction and humiliation, is almost over. You can leave the nets behind. All power is overcome in Christ. All power.