

With a Sense of Urgency 2021
Psalm 62:1-2, 5-8, 11-12 Mark 1:14-22

Psalm 62:1-2, 5-8, 11-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken. For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. *Selah* Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

Mark 1:14-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into 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. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

I still remember with surprising detail and clarity
exactly when, where & how God called me to pastoral ministry.
And that my initial reaction and response was not now, no way,
I'm not walking away from the career and life I've been building.

But again and again over the years and experiences since then,
God has graciously confirmed, blessed and renewed that call,
and I wouldn't trade the joy and blessings of ministry
for anything that this world might have to offer me.

The Gospel lesson today is about God's call, and it begins
when Jesus was just getting started with his public ministry,
which began after the arrest of John the Baptist, that ended
his ministry of preparing the way for the promised Messiah. vs. 14-15

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying,
"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Each of the phrases Jesus uses say more than the literal meaning.

The phrase, "the time is fulfilled"
draws from an image of a field finally ready for harvest.

The inference is that after a long wait and preparation,
as was described in the writings of the ancient prophets,
the life and mission of Jesus was the next step in God's plan.

The next phrase, "the Kingdom of God has come near"
means way more than just a place or location on a map.

Kingdom of God refers to when, where and how God's reign is revealed,
and describes life according the God's will, purpose & intention,
which will come to pass in the life & ministry of Jesus
just as the Lord God had been promising all along ...

...for wherever Jesus is, there the Kingdom is present.

In all four of the Gospels, the proclamation & message of Jesus begins with his call **to repent, to believe and follow me.**

In the Greek, the particular form of these three verbs specifically describes a continuing process or an action that is still going on.

So it is, “**keep on repenting, keep on believing, and keep on following me.**”
It’s not like a door that you walk through once and you’re done,
but it’s a lifetime of growing into faithful discipleship.

When we hear the word, “repent”
we may think of some wild-eyed screaming revival preacher,
threatening an eternity of suffering and burning in hell
if we don’t turn back from our sinful and worldly ways---

--- and that it’s up to us, our choice to repent and sin no more,
or face the terrible wrath of an angry and fearful God.

But in the original Greek the word **repent**
simply means a change in your direction or orientation,
a God-directed healing and blessing with new possibilities.
Repentance then, is our response to God’s gracious love.

This is good news. It’s hopeful, not threatening or fearful.
It’s a wonderful promise that things can change and be different
as our lives move toward something more meaningful & gracious.

To repent isn’t about saying, “I’m sorry and so now I’ll try harder.”
To repent is to admit, “I’ll never get this right on my own,
but I do believe & trust that God can & will heal my life.”

If repentance really is about trying harder & eventually doing better
then all we’d actually need, **is for God to be patient**
while we’re working harder to improve ourselves.

As a young Christian, I thought of repentance and grace as
something like God scraping away all the dirt and rust of my life,
and that now as a Christian, a follower of Jesus,
my task was to keep any dirt or rust from forming again
on the metal of my life that Jesus had scraped clean.

But these days, after a lifetime of trying and yet still failing,
I’ve come to recognize a difficult and more realistic truth,
that I’m never going to accomplish it on my own, not ever.
I still think, say and do lots of things that I later regret.

I don’t just need a patient God. I need a forgiving and healing God,
a gracious God I can trust and count on for mercy, healing & hope,
knowing that God will accomplish what on my own I cannot.

Jesus came to demonstrate the true nature of our God, love and mercy.

The life, teaching & ministry of Jesus reflects our God who invites
who welcomes the outcast, the sinner and the hurt and broken,
who seeks the lost, runs out to welcome the prodigal home,
and brings comfort to the grieving, injured & discouraged.

His message to each of us is, turn to me, believe and follow me,

and know I will help you become all that God intends for you.

That means the call to repentance isn't about fear, it's good news.

It's the wonderful promise that things can be different & better,
and we can move toward living more meaningful and useful lives.

Repentance is the promise, power and grace of God being enacted.

And the phrase and message, "believe in the Good News"
is far more than just intellectual agreement with doctrine.

The word translated as *Good News*

is literally an announcement of victory, declaring, "We've won!"

The Good News is the healing – saving grace and love of God in Christ,
and Good News announces God's victory over sin and death, is won!

To believe is to trust that God can heal and transform broken lives,
that God does bring about unimaginable and glorious change,
and can accomplish beyond anything we thought possible.

To believe is for that Good News to make a difference in how we live,
in our walk with God & our relationships with God's other children...

**... which leads to important questions,
how is the Good News of Jesus Christ affecting how I live?,
and what difference is what I believe really making?**

To illustrate what all that means and looks like in the world,
in the next section Mark provides an example, vs. 16-18

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into 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.

It is an important detail that Jesus came to the fishermen at work,
amid their ordinary, they're called to repent, to believe and follow me.
Again, these verbs are not a one-time response,
but call for action that will continue for the rest of their lives.

And the way that Mark's Gospel describes it,
these fishermen **exemplify the meaning of Christian repentance.**

There is nothing sinful or dishonorable about fishing,
so they weren't turning away from anything wrong or evil.

The point is, Jesus was calling them to something far better,
far more significant, more useful and meaningful, a deeper life.

**In the context of this Mark passage,
repentance is not primarily regret for sin we've committed,
but in response to God's initiative, God's grace and call,
toward something far better and toward something more.**

The point of this passage is a call to discipleship, to follow.

Follow me is the call to a life of discipleship we all receive,
and when someone responds extraordinary things can happen.

In the text, when they were called by the Lord, vs. 18
"immediately they left their nets and followed him."

The word **immediately** is used frequently in Mark's Gospel,
and it serves to stress the **decisive urgency** of the call,
to respond right now, don't wait until it's more convenient,
but get started now with whatever the Lord intends for us,
and begin your life-long process of discipleship.

Truly, God is always up to something good, healing and beneficial,
a purpose within the context and situation of our life,
providing new opportunities to grow and to serve faithfully,
for our lives to reflect in amazing and wonderful ways
God's grace, love, truth, compassion, joy & wonder.

**The point is, we are living projects of God's purpose and grace,
called to be and to serve as expansions of God's Kingdom.
We are called to see and respond to our world in new ways,
as salt and light making a difference in the lives around us.**

This next story is a good example of what that can look like.
Jack Eckerd was an effective business leader.
He worked hard and grew his business from three drug stores
into the second largest chain of more than 2900 stores.

In the 1980's he became friends with Chuck Colson,
who talked to him about discipleship, gave him books to read,
and at some point he became a committed follower of Christ.

Jack was chairman of the board of Eckerd drug stores,
and one day after he began taking his faith more seriously,
he noticed some young boys gathered together,
thumbing through Playboys and other dirty magazines
that they'd taken off the rack in one of his stores.

His concern wasn't that they hadn't paid for them,
but the influence his business was having on their lives.

Now Jack has seen that same thing many times over the years,
and it had never bothered him before...
... but now as a Christian,
as a disciple he saw the scene with new eyes.

When we got back to the office, he ordered the company president
to have all the dirty magazine removed from all the racks
and explained, they weren't going to sell them anymore.

When he was asked if he did it because of his Christian faith,
Jack answered, "Why else would I give up
more than three million dollars a year in profit?"
As he explained it, "The Lord wouldn't let me off the hook."

**An authentic encounter with Jesus changes things-changes people.
There is an initial encounter that begins our faith journey,
& then throughout our life, experience by experience,
God continues to call us deeper, to follow & respond.**

Long ago Jesus said, "follow me and I will make you fish for people",
and immediately the fishermen dropped what they were doing,
they came along with him, had the adventure of their lives,
and the world has never been the same since.

Today we too are invited to follow Jesus as his disciples.

**But are we willing to drop what we are doing,
to follow and serve as the Lord has called us?,
to follow and let the Holy Spirit transform us?**

As disciples committed to following Jesus,
the Spirit is at work in our lives with purpose and wisdom,
transforming our lives, and healing our wounds and fears
so that grace increasingly guides and influences us...
so that we can reflect God's truth, compassion and love
out to a world that is lost, struggling, damaged & confused.

We have been dealing with Covid-19 losses, difficulties & isolation
for far too many months, far longer and more weary than we expected.
It's been especially hard on our most vulnerable and alone,
a seemingly endless struggle crushing their spirit,
their need for human contact, affirmation and hope.

This is a real need all around us that we can do something about.
I am asking everyone in the sanctuary & those watching by video
to contact and connect with at least one person this week,
with a phone conversation or send a note, a card or an email...
someone you haven't seen for a while or who might be alone & isolated.

Try to connect, touch with hope at least one other person this week,
to remind them that they are precious and that they do matter,
and that as a disciple following Jesus Christ,
you do care about their needs and well-being.

That could be something meaningful that all of us can do this week,
not as a problem to be solved, but a life to be valued & touched
with God's own gracious love, life-blessing and compassion.

The Kingdom of God is when
in response to God's blessings & our relationship through Christ
we choose faithfulness over our own selfishness and apathy.

My fellow Christian disciples, fellow followers of Jesus Christ,
we are loved and called for our lives to have meaning and purpose,
and to accept a personal invitation to go fishing with Jesus,
"repent, and believe, follow me and I will make you fish for people."