

Jesus Begins to Preach

WORD & WAY FORMATIONS COMMENTARY
January 13, 2019 Scripture: Mark 1:14-28

In our everyday language the word “epic” means larger than life or uncommonly important. Mark’s



Michael K. Olmsted

arresting language describes the ultimate expression of God’s grace with “the good news of God.” When we hear the word “news,” our minds may conjure the incessant anger, immorality and daily tales of tragedy we hear or read. We need epic good news as desperately as the generation to which Jesus was born. The desperation level in the first century must have been equal to that we know in our time. People will grasp at anything and everything, but what we most need in this new year of 2019 is the hope and help of God’s grace found only in Jesus the Christ.

Jesus has been baptized in the Jordan River, faced the conniving enticements of the devil in the wilderness, and now he begins the greatest challenge of showing the world that God is real and his grace is the last hope for mankind. His message is simple and complex all at once: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news” (v. 15).

Life is composed of choices, and Mark launches into the possibilities of the life of faith with the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. First, Jesus encountered Simon and Andrew casting their nets along the shore of Galilee; then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, mending their nets. Ordinary men, without impressive resumes or wealth, were suddenly invited to a life without understood prospects by a carpenter’s son they did not know. Yet they followed this unlikely teacher from Nazareth. Of course they were familiar with the promise of a coming messiah which was taught in synagogue every Sabbath, but this man must have seemed ... less than qualified! We sense that the Spirit of God who had worked in Mary’s life and appeared at Jesus’ baptism was still very much at work

through Jesus and in the heart of each of those fishermen.

But Mark hurries his tale on as Jesus and his new disciples come to Capernaum the following Sabbath and worship in the synagogue. Synagogue services consisted in prayers and scripture readings. If a visiting scholar or rabbi were present he would be invited to speak, which means that Jesus probably had already been known to the synagogue leaders. The text says, “They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (v. 22). Those who qualified as “teachers” would carefully quote the respected scholars of the law and not propose some new interpretation or utter a prophetic announcement.

In Luke’s gospel we are told about the twelve-year-old Jesus’ visit to the Temple when the family was returning home and discovered he was not with them. Three days had elapsed before they could track Jesus down, and there he was among the great scholars and teachers of Israel. Luke describes: “And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and answers” (Luke 2:47). As we put the bits and pieces of the story together there must have been an earnest and gracious spirit about Jesus that drew peoples’ attention. Or we could say the Spirit was at work in the Son of God for the hope of the world.

No recitation of the old interpretations and admonitions; instead, what they heard was the promise of God entering their world as generations had hoped. Many of us have grown up with the Bible, memorized its promises and instructions, heard eloquent expositors, but this is the first record of the Savior audibly speaking the grace of God in a community house of worship. Had Jesus’ reputation already begun to spread? He did not look or sound like the promised messiah who would reestablish King David’s throne. Could it be that God’s Spirit was moving as in the days of Elijah or Isaiah?

From this point on the good news

will spread with or without the support of the religious establishment. Mark is anxious that we understand the full import in this normally quiet Capernaum synagogue. A man possessed of an unclean spirit cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (v. 24). The congregation must have been transfixed. Did this unclean spirit actually know the identity of Jesus? The forty days of wilderness temptations may be past, but evil is not relegated to designated circumstances. In fact, the devil will hound Jesus all the way to the cross – but no further.

Jesus rebuked the spirit: “Be silent and come out of him!” (v. 26). With convulsions and screams the evil spirit was vanquished. What is this?” the congregation asked one another. Not only did Jesus teach as though God were whispering in his ear, but Jesus could command evil spirits! You can debate the accuracy and meaning of this incident all you please, but do not dismiss its reality, for evil is only too real and obvious in our world. Satan is real and evil appears in ghastly forms in the events and tragedies of our day.

Jesus speaks with authority about the truth and grace of God and he lives out that truth and grace consistently. He calls us and empowers us to live differently and by doing so changes our world. Four fishermen left their ordinary lifestyle to follow the Savior and be part of changing lives, changing expectations and a wonderful future. The Christ way makes a powerful difference, but only if we are willing to change our values from selfishness to compassion and generosity. Where do your loyalties lie? Have you moved beyond the restrictions of a religious organization, creeds and doctrinal statements, to become a follower of Jesus?

As in the case of those first disciples, Jesus invites us to “fish” for people. You can only invite others to experience God’s love if you are living daily in that love. God calls us not to be religious but to help others find the way.