



**THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY  
JANUARY 24, 2021  
MARK 1: 14-20  
“LEAVING IT BEHIND”**

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

**SERMON**

We know how the story turns out, so it’s so easy to barely listen as I read the gospel.

But, as my analyst was fond of saying, “let’s slow it down.”

Mark starts off with a bang: “after john was put in prison.”

Right away, we are put on notice that this story is not going to turn out well.

On the surface, it seems pretty positive. John has been preparing the way for Jesus and people have been responding.

Rather than listening to the old religious teachers, the average joe and jane are getting fired up by john. Something new is coming down the pike.

And then Jesus bursts on the scene with his first public statement, “the time is now. The kingdom of God is drawing near to you.”

And here we need to listen to the Greek scholars who tell us that rather than repent, the better translation is, “be transformed and believe the good news.”

The familiar translation of the Greek as repent burdens us with some old school misery where religion becomes more like a third-rate drama where we feel really bad about ourselves. Weep and wail over our sins, feel sorry, crawl on our hands and knees before Jesus, and then go out and keep doing the same old thing.

But “be transformed!”



What an incredible invitation. Jesus, you mean there is a path for becoming more than I thought I could be?

There is a path where I can become an authentic human being?

That's a mouthful, so let's slow it down.

Sear it into your brain that Jesus calls himself the son of man--actually son of a man--not the son of God.

The Aramaic phrase "son of a man" had a long history throughout middle eastern spiritual literature. For our purposes, think of the phrase son of a man as meaning "the man" or "the human being."

The new testament scholar, Walter Wink, has an entire book on this subject entitled "the human being."

There has only been one human being so far in human history and Jesus is it.

The point is that Jesus is saying, "I have come to show you how to be transformed into a real human being and in doing so you will become divine."

This is the path. Engage the process of spiritual development, the process of deep psychological engagement. Allow yourself to be changed into a true human being. This will lead you into your own sacred existence.

Now this is all rather lovely and amazing.

Except, this path of becoming an authentic human being travels through the town called suffering.

Again, we should know this. The hint is right here from the beginning of this story in the first chapter of mark: "after john was put in prison." And eventually he ends up with his head on a platter and the rest of him on the floor.

And then the story picks up with Jesus walking beside the sea of galilee.

Let's slow it down.

Water has immense symbolic meaning. In contemporary spiritual language, we would call the sea the unconscious.

Or as I've been thinking of it: "the presence."

We are immersed in the presence. The presence of the holy. The presence of the unknown. The presence of beauty and trauma.



And Jesus is the ambassador of the unconscious, unknown. He comes to reveal to us as much as we are able to take in of the presence.

It is not by accident that he tells Simon and Andrew and James and John to follow him.

these four guys working by the water suggest that Jesus sees in them the potential of spiritual development.

Let's slow it down.

We have four fishermen. Fish also figure prominently in spiritual literature.

The symbol of the fish is the most prominent symbol for Christ in the early church.

Jesus is the fish that emerges from the waters of the unconscious where God dwells at the center. And Jesus has come to reveal to us the existence of the spiritual world: the presence.

The little fish swimming in the sea of the unconscious are thoughts, feelings, ideas, dreams, visions, and inspirations. Rumbly up from the waters.

And, as spiritual fishermen, we are given the opportunity to catch these spiritual fish throughout life.

The path of spiritual transformation is one where we catch, ingest, and integrate the sacred fish that rise from the waters of the unconscious—the presence—that surrounds us.

Because this is our lifelong spiritual task, the early church signified this by calling the baptismal font the fishpond. How cool is that?

Again, what we may overlook is that the process of transformation begins almost immediately for these four men after Jesus says, "follow me."

It happens so quickly that we may miss the enormity of this process of transformation.

The image is one of leaving family and livelihood behind for a path that is mystery.

One way to think of this is that Jesus is the first individual in human history. Until Jesus, the tribe is the central organizing principle. The group is more important than the person.

The religious laws are collective laws for everyone. This middle eastern culture is one where the individual is subordinate to the family, the clan, the tribe, the religious tradition.

So, right off the bat, transformation involves leaving behind what your family thinks you should do.

Hey, wait a minute, guys? Aren't you fishermen like your fathers before you and their fathers before them?



Aren't you a carpenter, Jesus, like your father, Joseph?

There is this difficult saying by Carl Jung: sometimes God asks us to go against God.

What can this mean?

For example, there is a collective religious value among us, given in the Ten Commandments of honoring your father and mother.

But one does not and should not honor an abusive parent. Get the hell out of there.

Sometimes God asks us to go against God.

The collective religious value is to remain faithful to your marriage vows.

But a person must not stay in a relationship that is killing spirit and soul. Sometimes God asks us to go against God.

And this is what is happening in our story this morning.

These four men are leaving behind all that is held sacred by the religious and secular cultures in order to follow the path of transformation.

From the start, the path is one of suffering as they leave family and vocation behind.

And here is guidance for the spiritual journey. It is not about adding more and more but leaving behind more and more.

What do we need to leave behind?

In eastern spirituality there is a saying, "what is your original face before your parents were born?"

It is a way at pointing to all the conditioning that comes down our genetic line that we think makes us who we are.

Who are you if you leave all your conditioning behind?

Who are Simon and Andrew if they are no longer fishermen?

Who are James and John if they no longer identify with their Father Zebedee?

Who are these four men if they choose to follow an itinerant preacher rather than stay in the comfort of their ancestral religion?



Let's slow it down.

I'll use myself as an example because I know me better than I know you.

I am a Lutheran because my parents were Lutheran.

I vote democrat because my maternal grandmother wagged her bony finger at me when I was eight years old and threatened me with the fires of hell if I didn't.

I am a musician of sorts because my parents were musicians and forced me to take music lessons.

I like Ohio state sports because I grew up in Columbus and it was one of the few things I had in common with my dad.

Even leaving behind these somewhat superficial aspects of myself seems inconceivable.

As if I could what? Be a republican Presbyterian who follows Michigan state and hates music?

Being transformed is a dicey proposition because it demands that we are no longer in control. We surrender our control to a higher power and a murky process.

Here I want to offer the words of Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar, who has one of the few sane religious voices today. He says it better than I can:

"Pain teaches a most counterintuitive thing—that we must go down before we even know what up is. In terms of the ego, most religions teach in some way that all of us must die before we die, and then we will not be afraid of dying. Suffering of some sort seems to be the only thing strong enough to destabilize our arrogance and our ignorance. I would define suffering very simply as whenever you are not in control.

If religion cannot find a meaning for human suffering, humanity is in major trouble. All healthy religion shows you what to do with your pain. Great religion shows you what to do with the absurd, the tragic, the nonsensical, the unjust. If we do not transform this pain, we will most assuredly transmit it to others, and it will slowly destroy us in one way or another.

If there isn't some way to find some deeper meaning to our suffering, to find that God is somewhere in it, and can even use it for good, we will normally close up and close down. The natural movement of the ego is to protect itself so as not to be hurt again. The soul does not need answers, it just wants meaning, and then it can live. Surprisingly, suffering itself often brings deep meaning to the surface to those who are suffering and also to those who love them."

Rohr is where I first heard the statement: God comes to us as our life.



So it is with that I want to let you know that I am resigning my call and entering retirement on Thursday, February 4th after the band and I record our last worship service that night.

The work of transforming CLC has been a path of suffering.

Deb, Laynie and I have had to endure more than is reasonable or right by people who call themselves by the name of Christ.

Three years of personal attack have reached a point where it is no longer tenable for me to continue my ministry.

This was not the way I imagined I would end my ministry, but I accept it because God comes to us as our lives. And I have already experienced that suffering is transformative. So I am curious to see how this will continue my transformation.

And I do believe that whatever is involved in this dying—this dying of my ministry with you at CLC—this dying of my active ministry--is something that has necessarily fallen on me.

The least I can do is practice what I have been preaching and submit to this experience that is out of my control....

It's taken me a long time to begin to understand Jung when he writes that Jesus was a failure. That's really a bold, almost offensive statement on the surface.

I think what he means is that Jesus put everything he had into his belief that the kingdom of God is now present among us. Surrounding us. In the midst of us. Even, within us.

And his commitment to his message led him to be nailed to a cross. Where everyone he had healed or fed or taught abandoned. His closest disciples were nowhere to be seen. His religious movement had been decimated so that the only people still hanging around at the foot of the cross were the two Mary's.

If we follow Jesus and work to become truly who we are meant to be and we put ourselves out there and we put everything we have into what we believe we will get nailed.

I get it and I got it....

After today, there will be two more worship services.

I plan to celebrate those services with some of my favorite music and we'll see if the spirit gives me anything worth saying.

And then I'll leave it all behind.