

Same Song, Second Verse

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Third Sunday after Epiphany - January 24, 2021

Texts: Jonah 3:1-10, Psalm 62:5-12, 1 Corinthians 7:29-21, Mark 1:14-20

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 62:5-12

Be still, my soul, and wait for God - where else can I find hope?

God alone is rock and salvation, a fortress too firm to be shaken.

Be still, my soul, and wait for God.

God is my deliverance and my honor; my rock and refuge.

O people, pour out your hearts and trust in God, who is your refuge, too.

Be still, my soul, and wait for God.

The lowly are no more than a breath; the lofty only a delusion;

Weigh them and together they are lighter than a wisp of air.

Be still, my soul, and wait for God.

Riches taken by theft or coercion have no true value;

wealth brings no happiness, money no cure.

Be still, my soul, and wait for God.

You have spoken and I have heard: all power is yours, my God!

Your power is the power of love; in wisdom is your just reward.

Be still, my soul, and wait for God.

GOSPEL READING Mark 1:14-20

Mark wastes no time moving Jesus into ministry. His favorite word seems to be “immediately.” But as we know, the proclaimer soon becomes the proclaimed; the one teaching about the good news will himself be the good news for all people. Today we hear Mark’s version of the calling of four disciples: last week, Andrew and brother Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael; this week, in addition to Andrew and Peter, another set of brothers: James and John. All four are fishermen.

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. And the word became flesh and lived among us. TBTG.

This week, we inaugurated a new president. Today we're living in a new world. Right? Sorry. It's the same world we were living in last week. Same people. Same problems. Same pandemic. Same feelings jostling for position inside me: fear and confidence, anger and love, doubt and hope, just in different proportions. It's still the same song, but a new verse, maybe in a different key.

Change doesn't happen overnight, despite how it seems sometimes. That's why Mark's use of "immediately" always gives me a little jolt. This shortest gospel uses the word as often as all the other gospels put together. It makes the disciples sound like robots, androids, or maybe even hypnotized. But Jesus is not the Pied Piper and they are not mindless followers. They screw up way too often for that! Robots would never get things so wrong. I think something must have been brewing already, for them to throw down their nets and head out after Jesus that way. There's always a before - and an after.

I remember driving down a familiar street in Chicago one evening about dusk. Leaning out of a second story window was a lovely young woman, her dark hair tumbling around her face, her eyes shining as she extended both hands downward. There, on the sidewalk, a young man in a white shirt was gazing up. The sheer joy on his face mirrored hers. In a second, I'd passed them, but the image stuck, as if: "In that very moment, they fell in love." It was a little romantic nugget, like a snapshot of Romeo and Juliet. But life isn't a snapshot. There's a before and an after; every picture has a history and a future. Love at first sight is a sweet sentimental idea but the heart has to be prepared for love to take root; and a relationship has to be cultivated for love to mature. There has to be *conversation* for mutual understanding: dialogue about differences, discussion about things that matter: home, children, money. Most likely there will be disagreements. Change happens.

Maybe Simon and Andrew and James and John were ripe for a change. Maybe they'd seen Jesus around, and heard him preach, and were just waiting for this summons. Maybe they were frustrated with fishing for a living! We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus spoke to them in words they could understand, in terms they: "I will make you fish for people." He called them to a new way of doing what they already knew how to do--a bigger, wider, more meaningful way. He spoke their language. And they heard, and responded.

How would Jesus speak to us today? To the mechanic, he might say, "I'll teach you how to tune up the world so it runs better;" to the lawyer, "I'll make you an advocate for divine laws as well as human ones;" to the nurse, "I'll train you to heal souls as well as bodies;" to the teacher, "I'll show you how to teach love along with literature." And so often people who truly feel called to their careers do all those things already, along with the nuts and bolts. The little things prepare them for the greater ones.

I believe all of us are being prepared for whatever comes next, all the time; until life ends in death, and maybe beyond that. Even sleep is a preparation for the morning's work. We may

ignore God's call, or we may deny it, but before we ever hear God calling, we've been equipped with the tools we need for God's work. I remember, when I was a 40-year-old seminarian, getting ready to leave for a challenging internship. What did I know? Who was I to go out as God's representative? I poured out my fears to my spiritual director. She said, "Jan, you're right. There's a lot you don't know. You may have some uncomfortable surprises. But remember: everything in your life so far has prepared you for this. You have all the tools you need." And she was right. Though, to be honest, I gained more than I gave. I was changed far more than I changed anyone or anything else. But isn't that always the case when you follow Jesus' call?

Like I said, the disciples bungled more than they did right. But the fact that they listened to Jesus at all meant they were ready to learn. Even their mistakes prepared them to take over when Jesus gave them the job of proclaiming the good news, of proclaiming him *as* the good news. They still didn't get it right all the time. They still competed with each other, and fought over the best way to preach the gospel, and who best to preach to, and how best to live as followers of the Jesus Way. Christians throughout the past two thousand years have disagreed, often to the point of literally being at war among themselves. Same song, second verse, right? But they got more right than they got wrong, or we wouldn't be here at all today.

Yes, we keep addressing the age-old problems of conflicting ideas of right and wrong, and encountering "new struggles around old issues in different contexts."¹ Every victory we think we've won is just a step along the way, and so is every apparent loss, but no victory will be complete until there are no losers, but only winners. When we all win. Not just all God's human children, but the animals and the trees, the air and the water, and earth herself.

That, I think, is the struggle God calls us to today: not to force the rest of the world to do it our way, but for all of us to talk about what strengthens everyone, so that both justice and mercy are served, and righteous anger is balanced by love, and legitimate caution is tempered by trust. Does that seem like a long shot? It was a longer shot in Jesus' day. We have come a long way since then. Democracy itself--government of the people, by the people, for the people--is just one proof. This past week is just a snapshot in the history of our country, a blink in the history of the world. The movement behind the moment equips us for the future beyond it.

Krista Tippett, whom some of you may know from her conversational public radio show "On Being," wrote movingly this week about vocation, our individual calling in this here and now:²

"Some of us are called right now primarily to get safe and fed and warm, to keep those we love safe and fed and warm. Some of us are called to place our bodies between other bodies and danger. Some of us are called to be bridge people," connecting those who are different, who may not see eye to eye, but who would rather be friends than enemies.

¹ Barbara Holmes, in Richard Rohr's daily online devotions, 1-18-21.

² Krista Tippett, *On Being* newsletter, 1-23-21.

“And some of us are called to be calmers of fear. This calling is so tender, and so urgent....” to calm fear is to coax people’s best selves, their better angels, into the light. “Fear...[closes] down a sense of the possible. It looks for an ‘other’ to blame, and it finds one. The anger that has consumed our life together on every side is fueled by pain and fear.” It need not be so. Who here today is not able to be in some way a “calmer of fear”? Isn’t that a worthier calling than raising alarms, and promoting terror? Who among us is not called and equipped to bridge the space between people, so-called adversaries, who in their hearts would rather live in peace than fight, would rather get along than arm for daily battle?

What changes the future is usually not one decisive moment, but the little choices, the small steps, the incremental turns made over time: made by individuals like you and me, and by groups like this one gathered today, made by flawed but idealistic nations like our own, with above all, the same God calling each of us, over time. Jesus didn’t ask the disciples to do something beyond their strength or outside their capabilities. He invited them to bring what they had to service in God’s kingdom. And God calls every one of us to do what we do best, in service that suits us. God is changing us, step by small step, to fit into a better future. *You* are called. *We* are called, not as robots, but complete human beings. We are called to listen. We are called to speak. We are called to love, even in our disagreements and disappointments.

The divine blueprint for the future is only slowly being revealed to us, for us, in us, as we go along, as we’re able to bear it. In the words of inaugural poet Amanda Gorman, “There is always light, if only we are brave enough to see it, if only we are brave enough to be it.” Amen.

Prayers

**God of time and eternity, God of the mundane and of the sublime, we are so small; our vision is so limited. Help us to see that though we seem to be singing the same song and worrying about the same woes over and over again, you are guiding us step by step to a better way of living. Help us to listen to and learn from one another what we need to know.

**Thank you for giving us the simple gifts of living, especially the roles we have been called to that are enlarged when we live in service to you and one another. Thank you for mechanics who help the world run more smoothly, lawyers who advocate for divine laws, nurses who heal souls as well as bodies, teachers who teach their students how to love.

**We pray for all who feel left out of the conversation as well as those who are burdened with the responsibility to care for the sick, educate the young, or provide for the needs of others, at risk to themselves. We pray for places in the world that lack access to the vaccine or to adequate health care; and for all people everywhere who feel they are fighting for their lives or their freedom. We pray for those who have taken up new leadership roles in our government, as well as for those who have left their roles. May all be instruments of peace, in their own way.