

Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 21, 2024
“To the Cross” (Mark 1:14-20)

Mark’s gospel is quick-paced and fast moving; direct and to the point. In the first few verses of the opening chapter, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and, in today’s text, launches his public ministry.

Mark tells us that Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God – the good news of God’s love, grace, and mercy – and saying, *The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near*. What Jesus was saying is that the Messiah had come. The One God had promised, the One for whom God’s people had looked for generations was now among them and had begun God’s personal reign on earth. The power of God was unleashed in the world and Jesus had come to bear witness to that power. He would teach with authority, cure the sick, cast out demons, and perform many other works of power.

His day had arrived – a joyous day for those on this side of the cross because we know how the story unfolds. We know that eventually, and ironically, Jesus would surrender that power. Although he held in his hands the power to bring forth all creation, the power that is above all the wonders and treasures the world has ever know, he would allow those same hands to be nailed to the cross and his power stripped from him. But after three days behind the stone, the awesome power of God would break through the power of sin and death and restore him to new life. Just as God saved the people of Nineveh 800 years earlier through the message of a prophet who had spent three days in a fish’s belly, God had now come to save us through his only Son who spent three days in a dark grave. The power of God’s love to save us is matchless. It is greater than any of our sin and deeper than any of our despair. It is above everything else in heaven or on earth.

But it wasn’t so easy on the other side of the cross. We cannot and should not forget Jesus’ humanity. This must have been a bittersweet day for Jesus. His cousin and the man who had baptized him had been arrested. This event must have hung over Jesus’ head like a thick, dark cloud – a painful reminder of his own destiny. Yet, in the midst of this cloud, Jesus came. He came to proclaim that the kingdom of God had come near. He came to make the most of each day and every opportunity to share the good news of what God was doing for those who believed. He came in the midst of that cloud to win salvation for you and me so that the kingdom of God could be ours. It couldn’t have been easy for him, knowing where his ministry would end, yet he came.

Life is not always easy for us either. Amid the joys of life, we, too, face times of trials, trouble and tribulation. We experience, grief, sadness, despair, and days when all hope seems lost. But we have a promise, a promise that gives us strength and encouragement on a journey. The promise is that Christ is always with us. His provision and care constantly surround us. It’s easy to recognize Christ in those “sunny” days when life is great. But it’s not so easy in times of pain or trouble. Those are the times in which we must remember that, just as Christ came proclaiming the good news, he continues to come to us today to comfort us with his power and presence. Sometimes he comes in the sunshine and sometimes he comes in the clouds, but he comes. He comes to fill our lives with his love and mercy.

After Jesus comes proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand, he immediately begins to build his staff. Mark tells us that 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. I will make you fishers of men.* That may seem like an odd thing for Jesus to have said, but he was speaking the language of these two men. They were veteran fishermen. They knew what fishing was all about. They knew the best fishing spots and how to cast their nets to haul in a load of fish. But they must have been puzzled. How were they to fish for *people*? Should they bring their nets along? Would they be able to use their fishing skills? Yet Mark tells us that *immediately they left their nets and followed him.* Then a few minutes later, he called to James and John. Immediately, they dropped the nets they were mending. Leaving their father in the boat with the hired hands, they, too, followed Jesus.

Mark makes it sound pretty simple. Without any hesitation or second thought, these disciples drop everything to follow Jesus. But I don't think it was as simple as that. Fishing was their life. They had turned it into a lucrative business. And they had homes and families who depended on them. They were being asked to leave it all behind. It was truly a sacrifice, but when Jesus called them, they dropped everything to follow him. It was no little thing.

In the years they would spend with Jesus, he would teach them how to fish for people. He would weave the net they would need for this job, but they wouldn't recognize it until later. This net would be the cross of Christ and the events surrounding it. The story of the cross would be the net they would cast to bring people to Christ. Had it not been for a place called Calvary, had it not been for that old rugged cross, had it not been for that empty tomb, there would have been no story of salvation. You and I would still be swimming in a sea of death, darkness and despair. Had it not been for a man called Jesus and his willingness to lay down his life, the net that has gathered us into his kingdom would have never been cast.

So, let's consider the cross for a moment. The cross of the Roman empire was very crude and rugged. I feel sure its surface was not sanded smooth. Therefore, in rubbing across it, splinters were picked up very easily. It was an instrument of torture, designed for execution of the most notorious criminals. It was so cruel, in fact, that the Romans didn't hang their own citizens on them – just those under their rule.

However, today we see very ornate, beautifully crafted, highly polished crosses that adorn our homes and churches. Then, it was a symbol of shame, humiliation and death; now, a symbol of hope, promise and life. The difference? The difference is because of that event 2,000 years ago that altered the course of history. Because of Christ's life-giving sacrifice everything changed for all of us who believe. And his cross – once an instrument of death – has become a symbol of life.

At the foot of the cross is where we find forgiveness. At the foot of the cross is where we find community, for we all stand there as beggars. At the foot of the cross is where we find life. Jesus calls to each of us today, just as he did to those first disciples: *Follow me. Follow me to the cross where you can lay down your burdens; to the cross where you can be comforted in times of pain and sorrow; to the cross where you can find the strength to go on. Follow me to the cross...and live.* Amen.