

Mark 1:14–20 (NRSV)

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.

## Ordinary People

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Mark 1:14-20

Drama and art to tell the story of Jesus have been a favorites of the church or a very long time. Indeed the sculptures, painting and the Roman Mass itself conveyed the Gospel to mostly illiterate throughout large expanses of Christian history. It continues today, of course. Some of you remember a few years ago when we had a friend of mine come to the church and perform a one-person, word-for-word enactment of the Gospel of Mark. And recently we held our Christmas pageant in which all of us were actors in the drama. Even Easter sunrise services try to artistically capture the morning of the resurrection. But perhaps one of the most impressive Christian dramas is the passion play, a reenactment of the last days of Jesus' life.

These vivid productions spring directly from the church's earliest teaching mission. In cities and towns dotting the whole globe, live performances of the passion take over whole towns during Holy Week. In many cases the performers will include as many as half the townspeople. And even those who are not part of the cast are virtually within the action. No screen or stage separates the audience. The noises, the smells, the physicality of the thing are inescapable. Everyone is literally part of the drama. In some areas passion plays are especially popular and renowned. One in Upper Bavaria attracts thousands of tourists from around the world each year. Audiences at this production, and at the many smaller versions, too, regularly report that they are moved to tears as they watch the play. They say that never before in their experience has the Gospel story been so alive.

Many years ago my father and mother attended a well-known passion play held in the Florida town of Lake Wales. Its fame had spread far and wide, and large audiences attended from All over the state and beyond. I was very curious to hear what their experience was like, what they felt and what they thought about it. As I recall, they were amazed by the sheer size and scale of it all. They told me how the whole region turned out for it and how they themselves had been swept up in the raucous crowd and the drama of the play. All in all, they were quite impressed and moved. But with a hesitant look and a bit of a catch in his voice, my father confessed that one part of it really bothered him. I had my ideas about what might bother me, and I supposed he might share some of them – the graphic depiction of violence, or the embedded anti-Semitism that has historically plagued the genre. I was surprised, however, by what most bothered my father. He said, and I quote, "I just had a hard time seeing a normal man playing Jesus."

I shouldn't have been so shocked. My father thought ministers sometimes thought too much of themselves, and they weren't claiming to be Jesus. No wonder he found it jarring to see an ordinary resident of New Wales, Florida walking down the street pretending to be Jesus.

This was, of course, a perfectly reasonable concern. Jesus was God, or the Son of God, after all. But even if my father had doubts about Jesus' divinity, he knew full well that Jesus was a better man than the guy from New Wales who was pretending to be Jesus, staggering down the street with a cross over his shoulder.

Well, the passion play is a story from the end of the story. In today's scripture passage we're at the beginning of the drama. In Mark, John baptizes Jesus, and a voice proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Mark doesn't make it clear whether anyone else but Jesus heard the voice, but as readers we are privy to the information. Jesus is the Son of God.

After his baptism Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted by Satan, whose temptations Jesus rebuked. The Gospel, then, starts off in the context of the divine—voices from heaven, superhuman feats of resisting temptation, and the presence of Satan and angels. Jesus is no ordinary man, and his is no ordinary mission, the story wants to tell us.

But then the mood shifts abruptly, immediately, to use one of Mark's favorite words. Suddenly, we're thrown back into the grit of the Palestinian desert. John the Baptist is all of a sudden arrested by Herod. Sinister forces, now quite earthly, are at work.

Jesus, the text tells us, repaired to his home region, the Galilee, after John's arrest. There he preached the nearness of the kingdom of God. And he began to call his disciples. Walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee he spotted two brothers, Simon and Andrew. He said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (There's that word again, immediately.) 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 think we sometimes get the wrong idea about how this calling of the disciples went down. The problem starts with the word 'immediately'. Mark uses the word incessantly, more than 40 times, to mark transitions and move his narrative along. It's a favorite word of his. Second, the Bible is notoriously terse in its stories. It doesn't fill in many of the details. "He said, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him." If you sent this description of the call of Jesus' disciples to a publisher today, they would send it back to you with questions all over the page. Where's the background information? What do we know about Simon and Andrew's family? What about the Zebedee family? Was their fishing business successful? How old were they? When did they meet Jesus? Were any of them married? And on and on the questions would go. The publisher would say, "We need more plot and better developed characters.

That's not what Mark, or most of the other Biblical writers give us, however. Mark is terse, barebones. In part that does serve his purpose. He wants to say that following Jesus was a decisive event. But the way we read the story, it's all too easy to think that Jesus showed up out of nowhere, went walking along the Sea of Galilee, spotted a few strangers, fishermen, commanded them to follow him, they recognized something special about Jesus, and without a moment's hesitation they dropped everything and followed him. Mark does want us to see that following Jesus takes a clear decision, but to modern ears he's made the immediacy of their decision stark and without a narrative context. Said another way, in this story it's easy to miss that the disciples were ordinary people, fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, and that in many ways Jesus was an ordinary man and perhaps a friend of long-standing.

They lived all in the area, Capernaum and Bethsaida. They probably had already known each other, at least for a while. According to the Gospel of John, Simon, Andrew and Philip had been disciples of John the Baptist down in Judea. Chances are that all of them are already involved in a movement, a movement that proclaimed new ideas and a time for change. "Repent, for the kingdom of God draws near," conveyed the kernel of the message, and it no doubt had been ringing in their ears for quite a while, probably in the Judean desert down by the Dead

Sea. But then John got arrested. The group down by the Judean Jordan dispersed. Jesus and those who would become his disciples returned to the Galilee. And then, not immediately but decisively, Jesus began to round them up. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. Follow me.” It was time. The mission had begun. The moment had arrived.

Ordinary men who fished for a living, whose families lived in homes in cities like Capernaum, whose mother-in-laws get sick, as we hear about a few verses after today’s passage, who lived ordinary lives and made ordinary livings. Perhaps the thing I most treasure about the opportunity I’ve had to go to Israel was to physically experience the ground on which these ordinary people enacted an extraordinary story. [Slide 1] To walk on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. [Slide 2] To see boats much like those Simon and Andrew, James and John would have fished from. [Slide 3] To see the still existing basalt walls of the houses in Capernaum. [Slide 4] To see what were the remains almost certainly of Peter’s family home, where Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law and many others. [Slide 5] To see the synagogue built on the foundation of the synagogue in which Jesus would have taught. [Slide 6] To see the stone benches on which the congregants in the synagogue sat and wonder if they brought cushions like some of you do. That’s a joke. [Slide 7] But kidding aside, to see a column carved in the fifth century with the inscription “carved by Alpheus the son of Zebidah the son of John” and note that 400 hundred years after the disciples were in Capernaum the old family names were still living on there, a genealogy of real people. Not unlike what some report feeling on seeing a passion play, when I was in Israel. I felt as though I was in the action of the story, and the people came alive in my mind’s eye. In a real sense could hear Jesus’ words as though they were directed at me. I hope these very few slides can convey a bit of the feeling. I hope so because it was a wonderful feeling to be a part of the story.

But what is really important is that these stories we read, these Gospels we read and sometimes reenact, are also meant to invite us into the story as participants. you and I are in the action. We are actors on the stage, as Shakespeare might have said. This story isn’t just an old story of long ago people. And it’s certainly not a story of people very different from you and me.

This is a story about Jesus inviting some ordinary people to new possibilities. It is a story of Jesus inviting them to follow him. It is a story that makes it clear that some days these followers are right there with him, and some days they don’t have a clue, and some days they fail miserably and even betray Jesus and the mission. It is a story in which Jesus guides and cajoles, warns and rebukes, all in the service of making them into disciples. It is a story of ordinary people, you and me and others like us actually, who are called to follow and to learn to be disciples, too. It is a story that invites us to join the action. Amen.