

January 21, Epiphany 3B (Mark 1:14-20)

Jesus wasn't popular.

by [Ismael Ruiz-Millán](#) in the [January 3, 2018](#) issue

Repent! Believe! In front of his audience in Galilee, Jesus gives a clearly stated call for action. There is a sense of prophetic urgency in his statement, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near”—perhaps because John the Baptist is in prison now. The one who prepared the way for Jesus and baptized him is in jail, and Jesus knows that his own time is near. He wants his audience to know it as well, and to faithfully respond to the reality of the kingdom he came to establish. Driven to communicate such an urgent message to all people, Jesus keeps walking, searching. He finds two fishermen, and later two more. Perhaps he says it again—*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent! Believe!*—before extending the invitation: “Follow me.”

So many seminarians, pastors, and leaders at large want to be prophets. And our world needs prophetic voices, people who can speak up and confront the oppressive powers of our world. We need people willing to say, “Here I am, Lord! Send me!” But we often get so excited about the the idea of being a prophet, so immersed in it, that we forget that being prophetic comes with a cost. We want to be prophets, but we do not want to pay the price. John the Baptist paid the price. He went to jail, and then he was killed. Prophetic ministry is a lifelong ministry, and it comes with a high cost.

Today it seems that being a prophet is often about being a trending topic, the one who makes the news. Or about being the most popular—about the likes or unfriends we get as a result of our prophetic voice.

Jesus isn't popular. The passage from Mark points to a shift: now that John is in jail, the prophetic ministry is passed on to Jesus. We see Jesus' prophetic ministry when he goes to unpopular places and people. We see him becoming less popular as he moves forward in his mission to declare the good news. Prophetic ministry is not about being the most popular; it's about being willing to become unpopular. This

text also reminds us that prophetic ministry is about timing. If we are honest, we might admit that our own prophetic practice is not necessarily about God's timing but instead about what is comfortable and convenient for our schedules.

Jesus' action is to go and encounter people where they are located. Prophetic ministry is about walking toward the places others do not want to go to. Jesus' action is to go to these fishermen and invite them to follow him, to do something totally different from what they were doing—fishing for people. Prophetic ministry is about offering alternatives to people who have not had a chance to see them.

Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador was a modern prophet. Romero understood the urgency of communicating that the kingdom is near, that humanity needed to repent and believe and follow Jesus. He understood the cost of prophetic ministry. And he was not afraid to confront the oppressive powers of his time, to demand that they stop oppressing the most vulnerable.

Even more significantly, Romero, just like Jesus, invited the most unexpected people to an alternative way—the way of Jesus' kingdom. Romero offered this alternative way to the poor and to their oppressors alike. He invited them to repent and to believe that Jesus' kingdom way is the way of love. Romero's attempt to proclaim the good news did not end well; he was the victim of a cowardly murder. But his legacy and example remain.

The cost of prophetic ministry is high, Mark tells us. Those who prepare the way for Jesus will suffer, be persecuted, and maybe even be killed. And while most of us will not literally be killed, our pride, our reputation, our status, our dreams might have to die for the sake of proclaiming the good news.

Our world today is not so different from the world Jesus addressed in Galilee or the world Romero addressed in El Salvador. We still have dysfunctional systems, including religious systems. We still live with an overwhelming and tragic chasm between rich and poor. Oppressive powers still allow the exploitation of children's bodies, black bodies, and female bodies. We need to repent for these sins and to believe that alternatives to such tragic realities exist. Like the fishermen, we need to follow Jesus—letting go of whatever makes us keep allowing the dehumanization of God's people.

John the Baptist discerns God's timing by paying attention to the signs of the world. He understands the urgency of his prophetic message, and he delivers it. Jesus

follows in John's footsteps and does the same. We need to follow, too.