

January 24, Epiphany 3B (Mark 1:14-20)

Jesus' ministry shows that preaching has consequences. We should preach anyway.

by [Brian Maas](#) in the [January 13, 2021](#) issue

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching.” The NRSV translates the last word as “proclaiming,” but either word works. My preference is preaching, because while we may occasionally refer to our pulpit work as proclamation, we by and large think of ourselves as preachers, and of our work as preaching. In Mark’s Gospel, that’s the first of Jesus’ works. He comes out of the gate preaching; all other actions follow. And what does he preach? “The good news of God,” the gospel.

While the campaign season of 2020 is behind us, preaching remains a formidable task as the United States experiences another peaceful—if highly disputed—transition of power. Among the many concerns affecting and afflicting the clergy with whom I serve, high on the list has been the challenge of preaching with integrity without becoming “too political.” That will remain a challenge in this season of transition, and well beyond.

This text from Mark has struck me more deeply in this time than it ever has before. What a powerful endorsement of the work we preachers do, this reminder that, at least as Mark tells the story, preaching is how Jesus launches his earthly work. It’s the pointy end of the spear or, to use less martial language, the first act of vulnerability.

This week’s texts remind us that this is our calling—and that it actually accomplishes something.

Preaching has consequences, and not just the threats of disgruntled parishioners. Mark makes it clear that the consequences aren’t petty but powerful, even life changing. And there’s no reason to think it’s any different now.

Once Jesus starts preaching, the action verbs start rolling. Because the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, it's time to repent and to believe. Not only that, it's time to follow. Mark doesn't say that the first four disciples have heard Jesus' preaching, but they certainly repent, practice *metanoia*, change their minds, and choose a new direction for their lives. One might be safe assuming there is an element of belief there as well.

Regardless of the particulars—and Mark isn't too concerned about them—he does lay out the path to discipleship, to followership. In response to the preaching of the Good News that God is near in time and space, the disciple turns from whatever direction her life is headed, trusts the preaching, and follows Jesus.

It all starts with the preaching.

This isn't an instruction manual on evangelism. Virtually no one is going to show up in your building (or appear in the video feed of your technology of choice) to hear the Good News and be converted on the spot by the power of your preaching, no matter what they told you in seminary.

However, there are any number of pairs of ears that will be tuned to your proclamation, seeking a whisper of good news in the clamor of so much bad. Leading with our preaching as Jesus did, we have the opportunity to speak that Good News, news of a God whose time is not only near but now, whose presence is not only in reach but inside. Whether by invitation or exhortation, such Good News can lead to repentance, not in the “turn or burn” sense but in the sense of a changed mind and changed direction. In that turning-from there is the possibility of turning-to: of turning to and following Jesus in the direction of true freedom, willing servanthood, truth telling, forgiveness, and healing. All the way to the cross.

Honesty in preaching compels us to inform our hearers, Jesus' disciples, that faithful living has consequences. It's important to remind them of that in this very text—that immediately after John is arrested for proclaiming repentance, Jesus' first act is to proclaim repentance. Preaching has consequences.

Faithful living has consequences, too: arrest, repudiation, condemnation, even death—including the death of biases and prejudices, privilege and the insistence on one's way, one's ego and one's facades.

In spite of the consequences, Jesus preaches. In spite of the consequences, the four fishermen follow. Though those four cannot know it in advance, we know (and too often forget) that the consequences of faithful living also include the experience of true resurrection—resurrection to new awareness, new opportunity, new relationships, new life. Something in Jesus' call, perhaps because they've heard and believed the Good News of his preaching, leads them to repent, to set a new course for their lives, and to follow.

Unlike the call of the first disciples that John's Gospel describes the previous week, most of those to whom we preach are not waiting around, curious for a kerygma to latch onto or a faith leader to follow. They are more like Peter and Andrew, James and John, engaged in the mundane tasks and familiar distractions of their daily lives. Yet for all that, some of them will be ready for a message that catches their attention, for a word that appeals, for the Good News of a freedom from and a life beyond their dutiful dailiness.

"Jesus came to Galilee, preaching," and four dared to follow, and the world forever changed. That possibility exists still—not in our preaching but in the Good News it contains. Long after John's arrest, perhaps not so long after the equally abrupt departure of the pastor down the street, this remains our call, and our promise and our hope.

Preach it.