

The Great Invitation

Mark 1:14-20

Bryn MacPhail / Jan. 1, 2012

As we begin our study of the Gospel of Mark in the middle of chapter 1, at verse 14, we learn that John the Baptist has been put in prison and that the preaching ministry of Jesus has begun.

“The time has come”, Jesus declares. **“The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”** (1:15).

Before we attempt to unpack what exactly it means to repent and to **believe the good news**, it is necessary to establish another point.

It would be a mistake to read the Gospel of Mark as mere history. Indeed, it is history—Mark carefully records the highlights from the ministry of Jesus, which took place in a particular region of the world at a particular time in history. The mistake, however, would be to disconnect what Jesus called for *then* and what He calls for *now*.

We should not read the call to “**repent and believe the good news**” as if it were simply a call for *them*. It is also a call for *us*.

And so, as we journey through the Gospel of Mark over the next several weeks, I don’t simply want us to acquire *information* about what happened “way back when”. But rather, my hope is that our engagement of the ancient Word prompts a present day *transformation* within each of us.

The very first call Jesus issues as He begins His ministry is the call to “**repent**”. The Greek word literally means, “to turn around” and implies heading in the opposite direction.

The sense is that each of us is naturally inclined to pursue and prioritize the things of this world. This is the realm we can engage with our natural senses, and so it naturally draws us in. But then along comes Jesus, who explains that *there is another realm—the kingdom of God*—and this realm should be focus of our attention.

I would like to suggest that there is a natural connection between the call to **repent** and the call to **believe**. The call to repent, as we’ve said, is a call to change our direction and

focus. And this change of focus is necessary in order for us to receive what Jesus is offering.

Let me give you a personal example, which might help. In the Spring of 2010, before our move to Nassau, Anya and I went to the Rogers Centre to watch a Toronto Blue Jays baseball game. Our seats were a few rows behind home plate and we were in a perfect position to catch a foul ball that might come our way. Having played baseball for my entire childhood, and having played goalie in hockey for 30+ years, catching a baseball looped backwards into the stands would be very easy for me. And wouldn't you know it, a ball was fouled backwards right at me during the game.

I mean, this ball was right at me. If there ever was a 'gimmie' catch, this was it...but I missed it.

What happened?

Just before the ball was hit to us I became distracted by my iPhone. Someone had made a Scrabble move against me and so I was thinking through my next move. I was no longer focused on the baseball game. My focus was on a video game on my phone.

And as a result of my misplaced focus, I missed out on something that otherwise would have been easy for me to receive.

Similarly, before a person can believe in the message of salvation, they need to be in a posture that is ready to receive. To this end, Jesus calls us to **repent**—He calls us to reposition our attention. We need to shift our focus from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God.

Once our positioning has been corrected, the call comes to us to **believe the good news**.

The Greek used here can be translated “good news” or “gospel” (KJV), and in Jesus’ day it was a word that was often used without any religious connotation. For example, in the first century, if the emperor issued an edict that improved the living conditions of the people, or if a war was won against another nation, a herald (or evangelist) would be commissioned to proclaim the gospel (or good news) to the people.

I hope you will see that this declaration by Jesus to “**believe the good news**” positions Christianity in a way that distinguishes it from all of the other major world religions. Look at the other world religions of the world, and at their aimed at destinations, and you will inevitably find a prescription to *do* a number of things in order to achieve the desired result (be it Nirvana, Paradise, or a favourable reincarnation).

Christianity is framed quite differently. The message of Jesus is that we should believe and accept what has already been *done* for us.

The advent of Jesus was not some Divine public relations strategy. Jesus did not come as a kind of cosmic cheerleader to say, ‘Keep up the good work. You’re almost there. I’m here to help you tweak a few things and then you’ll be fine.’

No, *Jesus came to do for us that which we were incapable of doing for ourselves.*

Jesus arrives then, not saying, ‘Here is what you need to do’, but rather, ‘Here is what has been *done*.’ This is the good news—believe and accept it.

Friends, this is *the great invitation*.

Yes, there are things for us to do, and things for us to avoid—but these things don't determine our eternal destiny. As Christians, we don't follow a moral code in order to earn God's favour, but rather, we behave a certain way in order to honour the One who has already bestowed us His favour.

The second invitation by Jesus is given to particular men in order that the great invitation may be extended as widely as possible. Just as the emperor commissions heralds to proclaim the good news relating to his edicts, Jesus commissions certain individuals to proclaim the good news as it relates to the kingdom of God.

Mark says that, **“as Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow Me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed Him”** (1:16-18).

You can read the longer version of this story in Luke chapter 5. In Luke 5 we read how Jesus filled their nets with fish after they had been out all night without catching a thing. Mark, for

whatever reason, has left this detail out. Perhaps Mark doesn't want anything to obscure the main point: Jesus called some fishermen to follow, and they followed.

The pattern is repeated with James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Jesus calls them "**and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed (Jesus)**" (1:20).

There are at least 3 significant things about this accepted invitation which we should note:

First, they responded immediately. What these men witnessed must have been extremely compelling. Many of us would have been tempted to at least ask Jesus some questions:

"What's your game-plan?"

"Can we have some time to talk this over with friends and family?"

"What kind of accommodations are we looking at? Do you have a manse?"

There is no sign of any hesitation on the part of Simon, Andrew, James and John. They are said to have followed "**at once**" and "**without delay**".

The second thing I would like us to note is that they left significant things behind in order to follow Jesus.

Mark records that Simon and Andrew **left their nets**. This is Mark's way of pointing out that these men left behind their livelihood in order to follow Jesus. In verse 16, Mark says that Simon and Andrew **were fishermen**. In verse 17, Mark records that they immediately heeded the invitation to become **fishers of men**.

The description of what James and John leave behind is even more striking. Mark records that **they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed** Jesus. Can you imagine this scene transpiring from Zebedee's vantage point?

"What are those boys doing? We still have some nets to clean."

"And who is that man they are speaking with? And why are they leaving with him?"

I think this is important to note because I have met a great many who would like to have Jesus, but are unwilling to give up anything to get Him. While the word "**repent**" implies a complete change of direction, I have spoken with individuals

who want to add Jesus while continuing with their existing trajectory.

I would suggest that those who are unwilling to give up anything, or change anything, for Jesus have not yet come to understand the full value of following Jesus.

And yet, amazingly, these fishermen followed without knowing precisely who Jesus was. It's not as if Jesus walked over there and said, "Good afternoon. Now, you don't know me, but I'm here to tell you that I'm the Son of God. I was conceived by the Holy Ghost three decades ago, and now the time has come for me to unroll my eternal plan to save the human race. If you follow me, I can assure you that you're going to see and do some incredible things and will be remembered for the rest of human history."

But, that's not what Jesus did. As far as we know, He simply filled some nets with fish and invited these men to follow.

Now as we think about applying these principles, I wouldn't want you all calling me on Monday to tell me that you've quit your job and moved out of your family's home. There is a sense

in which the call to Simon, Andrew, James, and John was *particular*.

However, there is also a sense in which the call to Simon, Andrew, James, and John is *general*—and therefore, is transferrable to us.

We may deliberate and consult on a great many things, but *if Jesus issues a clear call to us from His Word, it needs to be heeded without hesitation.*

Secondly, as we respond to a clear call from Jesus that comes from the Scriptures, *it may become obvious that we need to give up something in order to answer the call.* We might need to yield resources. We might need to give up a regular social commitment to free up time and energy to follow Jesus. We might need to give up a particular behavior, which would hinder our ability to answer Jesus' call.

And thirdly, *don't wait until you have every question answered before you begin to follow Jesus.* As Dr. Martin Luther King has said, "You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

If Jesus is leading, there is no need to be anxious or fearful.

Friends, today is the first day of a new year. Some of you have made New Year's resolutions.

May I be as bold to suggest one to each of you?

Be resolved to prioritize Jesus above all else.

Some of you are imagining right now that such a drastic resolution may actually interfere with your other resolutions.

The approach for some of you will be to try and be the best spouse you can be, the best parent you can be, the best employee you can be, the best business owner you can be, the best student you can be, the best friend you can be. And your thinking is that once you have some momentum in those areas you're focusing on, you'll begin to engage your sincere intention to follow Jesus.

I'd actually like you to flip that around. I'd like to suggest to you that your progress in this one thing will help your progress with all those other things.

I guess what I'm really inviting you to do is the very thing Jesus called us to at the outset of this passage: "**Repent and believe the good news!**" And when Jesus calls, be sure to follow.