

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

THE CRISIS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Mark 1:14-23

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Analysis by Steven Kuhl

14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. 17And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

The Chinese character for "crisis" is a combination of two other characters meaning "danger" and "opportunity." A moment of crisis is therefore a "turning point," a "decisive moment," in which life hangs in a balance. Which way one turns, what decision one makes determines the future for good or for ill. The Greek word "kairos" in our text, translated as "the time is fulfilled" (v. 14), has this sense of crisis or urgency about it, especially, when seen in the context of the call to "repent", i.e., "to turn around," and "believe," i.e., hang your hopes on something new, the Good News of Jesus Christ. This

double meaning of crisis informs my analysis of the text.

DIAGNOSIS: Crisis as Bad News, Danger

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Business As Usual: Fishing for One's Livelihood*

Simon, Andrew, James and John don't know it yet, but they are about to find themselves at a "turning point," a decisive moment, indeed, a crisis point, in their lives. But not quite yet as they first appear to us in the text! As they first appear, they are immersed in business as usual, as they should be: casting their nets for the days catch (v. 16) and fixing their nets so as to fish another day (v. 19). That's business as usual, which is synonymous here with life under the law. It is occupied with making a living and tending to the tattered nature of our existence. Yet, as they do this, they have no idea what dangers or opportunities await them as they go about business as usual. And why should they? That time (kairos) hadn't come yet. Has ours?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Content with Business As Usual*

Surprise of surprise, the decisive movement or crisis or kairos comes in the form of a preacher-Jesus. But here's the problem. He looks to be anything but pivotal. To top it off, his message, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near" (v. 15) doesn't even sound all that original. In fact, the message sounds basically like the ill-fated John the Baptist's, "Repent...the One ... is coming" (cf. 1:4-8), except for this caveat. Jesus says "follow me" (v. 17) as though he is "the One." But then, not even that claim is unique. For there are many making such wild claims throughout Galilee (cf. 13:21). How easy it is for these fishermen to dismiss this preaching and remain content with

business as usual. At least, until something more impressive, more earth shattering, more obviously crisis evoking (like an invading army or a grand windfall) comes along. How easy it is for us, too?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Danger or Bad News in Business As Usual*

Most tragic of all is the fact that we can't even imagine the danger we are in when we choose to remain content with business as usual. To choose business as usual over Jesus is to be stuck with its consequences, crisis as danger only, without any hope or opportunity. To take a page out of today's headlines: It's like a mining company having received all the appropriate governmental ("kingdom") warnings about the dangers within their mine, only to ignore them and go about business as usual, until it's too late. "Too late" in this case means no alternatives left, no opportunity for something different. "Too late" means that danger alone is reality, the death of miners a fact and the condemnation of the business and its agents sealed. All that remains, then, is Bad News.

PROGNOSIS: Crisis as Good News, Opportunity

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Crisis of the Cross As Good News/Opportunity*

Although Jesus' preaching included the preaching of danger, his preaching did not create the danger. (By the way, neither did the preaching of John the Baptist or the Prophets.) Rather, the danger (God's lawful condemnation in our business as usual) was already present (though not always perceptible) in business as usual and wholly of our making, our fault. What Jesus came preaching was "good news" (v. 15), that is, the opportunity to escape the danger to come through partnering with him. But here is the point: That Good News, unlike the danger, IS wholly the making of Jesus. He makes the Good News a reality when he goes

to the cross and takes our crisis, our danger, our condemnation, our death unto himself and turns it into opportunity, into mercy, into resurrected life. The cross and resurrection of Christ is that crisis, that turning point, that moment of decision by God in Christ, ushering in the Kingdom of God, God's reign of forgiveness, mercy and grace that that takes business of usual and turns it into the business of grace. The cross affords the world a new crisis, one that acknowledges the danger of condemnation and death but affords opportunity for forgiveness and new life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *"Follow Me" Means "Repent ... and believe the good news!"*

How to take advantage of the opportunity of the cross afforded by Jesus? That is the central focus of the text today. The answer Jesus gives is clear and simple: "Follow me" (v. 17), he says. One looks in vain for a rational reason, (as the world thinks of rational), for why Simon, Andrew, James and John followed. They simply "repented," turned away from being content with business as usual, and "believed the good news" (v. 15); they placed their lives, their present and their future, in Jesus. Jesus' invitation was their reason. The same is true for all disciples. His invitation, for them, is opportunity too good to pass up. In him, they believed, they were afforded a new opportunity on life. What ever bad news they had amassed for themselves, he promised to turned it into good news, like the cross yielding to resurrection. No longer would they live in business as usual, seeking their own livelihood. By faith they lived in the Kingdom of God: their livelihood was secured. The Kingdom that is "at hand" in the preaching of the Good News concerning Jesus Christ is "in hand" by faith in that preaching, in that Good News, in that Christ.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *"Fishers of People" = Doing the Business of Kingdom in the World We Find*

Ourselves

For Simon, Andrew, James and John, the invitation to follow Jesus called them into a radically new line of business. This is signaled in the text when Simon and Andrew “left their nets” (v. 18) and James and John “left their father” (v. 20) to become “fishers of people.” While it is true that some disciples are called to leave worldly businesses, like fishing, and become itinerant apostles/missionaries in the world (cf. 3:13-19 and 6:6a-13), it would be a mistake to think that all disciples are so called. For example, one could easily assume that “father Zebedee and his hired men” (v. 20) became disciples of Jesus and remained fishermen. After all, the Gospel of Mark is filled with examples of people who “repented and believed the good news,” i.e., “followed Jesus,” but did not leave their business or their families. Nevertheless, all disciples, no matter what their outward line of business, are called to “fish for people.” However, for the disciple, what ever worldly business they may be in, that business is no longer simply business “as usual.” Those very businesses themselves have been transformed into “opportunities” for proclaiming the Kingdom of God in word and deed, as opportunity affords. As one of the Offertory Prayers in the Lutheran Book of Worship puts it, Christians are in the business of dedicating their “lives to the care and redemption of all that [God has] made.”