

# Third Sunday after the Epiphany

THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR

Mark 1:14-20

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

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.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Not Believing in God's Reign

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *We Don't Want God to Reign*

Our text begins with the arrest or handover of John. (It is the same word as "betrayal.") This is the same John who had proclaimed to people their need for "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4). He administered this baptism to them so that they could be part of the rapidly approaching

kingdom or reign of God. But not all wanted to hear about their sins. King Herod in particular preferred to arrest the prophet who called into question the legitimacy of his royal action than repent and welcome God's reign. If God reigns, then we don't, and God's incoming reign may not reflect the way we wish the world would be. We will certainly be humbled in it, and who honestly wants that? Where we have power, the announcement of God's coming kingdom does not strike us as "good news."

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *We Don't Think God Knows How to Reign*

After John's arrest, Jesus picked up John's message of the approaching kingdom of God, but he added more urgency to the need for people to change their minds because "the time is fulfilled" (v. 15). But, really, this is a strange message. Has God not been reigning, or has God been reigning in some other universe, not here? If we look around it certainly seems as if God is not reigning, or if God is, that God's rule is violent. Then and now, the world is full of injustice, corruption, and killing. No wonder we want to take the reign into our own hands or at least to align ourselves with the powerful and serve them in return for safety and favor; the humble only get crushed. We tend not to believe or trust in the kingdom of God.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *God Reigns Nevertheless through the Accusation of the Law*

In telling us this episode from Jesus' life, Mark uses language that is reminiscent of the prophet Jeremiah, from whom it becomes clear how God has in fact been reigning in this world. God calls us continually through the Law to love our Creator and the rest of the people and the created world that is God's handiwork and remains God's kingdom; it has never been up for sale. It is not ours to destroy. Nevertheless, we do not honor God and others. So God calls us continually through the Law to repent and change our minds and lives. The alternative is to

live in the hell we have created, worshiping those whom we have made gods because of their apparent power. In Jeremiah's time, God swore to give the people what they wanted, saying, "I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your ancestors have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor" (Jeremiah 16:13).

## **PROGNOSIS: Trusting the Promise of God's New Reign in Jesus**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Jesus Brings in a New Reign of God*

So, what "reign of God" does Mark repeatedly call "good news"? The prophets looked forward to a "time" when God would reign in a new way. Even now, God tells Jeremiah, "I am...sending for many fishermen...and they shall catch [the people of Israel]" and gather them home in the net of God's kingdom (Jeremiah 16:16). The kingdom Jesus preached was "good news" because it was the news of a gathering, a homecoming. To make sure the point was not lost, Jesus called fishermen to cast the net of God's kingdom: Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Jesus' words to them, "Come after me," indicate that this reign of God is wherever Jesus is. If we follow Jesus through Mark's gospel, we see him living out the history of his people in his own life, all the way through their exile as he died on the cross and on into the new kingdom God promised as he was raised from among the dead. This new reign goes beyond any other reign, including God's own other reign through the Law. Nothing has power in God's new reign except the healing, forgiveness, and new life that God the Holy Spirit gives. For Mark has opened his gospel (good message) by telling us that Jesus is the Son of God who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit, another sign of the prophesied new reign of God.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *We Are Gathered*

### *by Faith into God's New Reign*

Those who follow Jesus go with him through this history of arrest, death, hell, resurrection, and new life in God's kingdom. The fishing followers we see immediately repenting, or shifting their lives around, in this text from Mark may not know exactly what is in store for them, but they trust the promise of God's good reign. They trust it enough to proclaim it to others even before they see it. This new kingdom of God with Jesus as its king is often very, very hard to see. So many other would-be-rulers clamor for our attention, as if they were a myriad of advertising billboards or pop-ups on the screen. Jesus' call to Simon, Andrew, James, John, and us is simple, "Follow me," no matter what happens. In our second reading for the third Sunday after the Epiphany, Paul urges us not to let anything else tear us down or build us up (1 Corinthians 7:29-31); when we are with Jesus we are in the kingdom of God even if we cannot see or feel it, even if all appearances are to the contrary.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : We Welcome God's New Reign**

For those who have seen in Jesus the end of what the world calls power, including our own fear of it or craving for it, the announcement of God's new reign is truly good news. If we are sinners, we have seen how Jesus came in order to call sinners, to love them, to forgive them, to carry them in himself beyond their sin and into a new life. The humbling may still be difficult, but repentance may come as a relief, too. Our sin is no longer ours to bear; the sins of others no longer need to be theirs to bear either. We, too, have become fishers for people, gathering them into God's net, which is the reign of God.