

Bishop Greg Mohr - BC Synod

Ominous words begin today's gospel reading.

"Now after John was arrested..."

You can hear the music in the background change. There is a sense of foreboding . . . danger. Granted, these are not the first words in the gospel of Mark, but they are pretty close to the beginning. After all, we're only in chapter 1, verse 14 here. But these are the first words of this large, major section of the gospel of Mark. This begins Jesus' ministry.

Before I go further, I want to bring my greetings to all you across the ELCIC, as well as to the parishes of the Anglican Diocese of Caledonia in northern BC, and to Bishop David Lehmann, upon his invitation to share in this way for the observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Now after John was arrested..."

Reading those words, you know that there is more than a hint of danger here. There is a recognition that evil, that sinister powers, are at work. There's a darkness that hangs in the air. It's a foreshadowing, certainly, for we know the rest of the story and of what happened to Jesus.

Jesus is always mindful of what he will be facing, confronting, and encountering in the months and years ahead. The gospel writers often refer to Jesus as "turning his face toward Jerusalem." (Again, another ominous statement.) Maybe John's arrest was expected; inevitable. Not only did

John confront the religious leaders of the day by using some not-very-nice words “ –you brood of vipers” probably doesn’t sit very well; I mean, that is going to elicit a few calls to the Bishop, I tell you, by congregational members concerned about their pastor’s lack of tactfulness.

But John the Baptist also had the temerity to challenge King Herod #2. John made the unpardonable sin (from the King’s perspective, that is) of challenging the King’s morality. Herod not only married his own niece, which was *verboten* enough, but his niece was also married to Herod’s brother at the time.

Well, John the Baptist didn’t think this was an action worthy of a king and said so. He condemned Herod and Herod took offence. And so now John is in prison and things look grim. Enter, stage right, Jesus. Jesus is from the town of Nazareth in Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is about 30 kms to the east. Jesus comes proclaiming the good news of God — “gospel.”

This is the **kairos time**, the right time. The reign of God has come near. It is at hand, right in front of you, all around you. This is God’s time, breaking in, among us, in us, through us. “Turn around,” said Jesus. “Repent. You’re going the wrong way. The good news is here. God’s activity is among you.”

Then Jesus goes for a walk along the beach. He sees Simon and Andrew — brothers — fishing. And he calls them, to come and follow. It’s sort of

not how we do things when calling someone for ministry. What happened to the colloquy exams of candidates? And what of ordinations and council meetings and issuing formal letters of call? No. Here, Jesus speaks, a word: “Come. Follow me.”

It is a word that invites us, calls us, calls us to something, calls us into something; calls us on a journey of which we cannot know the ending.

Simon and Andrew are the first to be so called. Then also, Jim and Johnny. There are more to come in this Round #1 of the Disciple Draft. But these four begin the gathering of the disciples.

Now remember what I said about the theme of the opening statement in this story — about John’s imprisonment. That is the context in which this “Call” story takes place. It speaks of the hardships and challenges of life, and it speaks of ministry “*in spite of*” such things. The gospel calls us, compels us, to be people of grace, to be light in this world, and salt of the earth, in spite of, or maybe *because* of the difficulties and challenges we face.

Jesus calls.

Jesus does not promise a life of ease. He certainly does not promise riches and wealth. But he does promise that he will be with us, all the way to the cross and beyond. It is this promise of grace and presence that sustains us during the dark moments of our lives.

Jesus and John the Baptist faced the reality of despotic rulers and the likelihood of imprisonment – even death. They witnessed evil incarnate, and they also saw how cheap life was and how easily people were cast aside in their society. For us, maybe it's not “evil,” so much as just the reality of life in this day and age. COVID-19 is laying bare the divisions in our society and the systemic injustices all around us.

We see more clearly the financial inequities, the extra burdens placed upon the poor, the underemployed, those without security of housing, without secure access to food, without guarantees of work. We see those who are marginalized be even more at risk.

We see so vividly how this COVID-era has affected people's mental and emotional health; the increasing stress and strain, the challenges many face in their relationships. We see more clearly the fragility of life, the vulnerability of elders in care. And yes, for many of us, for **all of us**, there is the reality of heartache, pain and sorrow; of isolation and loneliness, and perhaps also the death of a loved one.

For many people in this COVID-era, there is a renewed search for meaning and purpose; unsure of their place in this world, of what they want their future to be. Old patterns and ways of being and thinking are being rethought. What can be, should be, needs to be, set aside? What am I learning about this time that I want to ensure stays with me as we move forward together?

What does it mean to be kind? To be part of community? To live out our faith? To live out this calling that we have been given by Jesus?

As the world has changed around us, we are struggling with questions as to what it means to be the church in this 21st century. It used to be that we could put up a new church building and people would come and fill it. That doesn't happen anymore.

Our world today is quite different: it is increasingly multi-cultural; increasingly multi-faith; there is a strong emphasis on “personal” and “individual” faith; and where everything is “relative”; and there is a significant consumeristic approach to religion as people pick and choose from a variety of religious and spiritual practices. In addition, religion is often seen as suspect, particularly as the radicalism of religion increases. As if these challenges were not enough, we are hearing more and more that people simply find the church irrelevant.

In light of such dramatic shifts in the world and within the church itself, it is easy to be paralyzed. We often are unsure of what it means to **be** the church and **how** to be the church in this day and age. But in the midst of this uncertainty, in the midst of this changing culture, Christ's call to each of us remains the same. Jesus prayed for us with these words: “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Such words are

a reminder that the church does not exist for itself but that Christ calls us to be in the world. Jesus 'call to us continues to re-orient us; to refocus our attention and our action. First and foremost, his call reminds us of our **identity**: that we are claimed by God, adopted, spirited, enlivened.

It is **Christ** who calls us; and it is Christ who sends us into the world . . .

Or maybe a better way to say that is: It is Christ who calls us out into the world in which Christ is already there; to join Christ in the world, walking along the seashore, serving those on the margins, challenging systems of injustice, caring for the lost, the last and the least, welcoming prodigal children, turning water into wine, and hearing that even a cup of water given in his name is big and huge and Christ-like.

Our identity informs our living; that is, our **living** arises out of our calling, out of our identity. Baptized into Christ we are called to the same mission and the same ministry to which Jesus himself was engaged. That is our calling. That is our vocation. The word **vocation** literally means a call or summons. According to James Fowler, "Vocation is **NOT** our job, our work, or our occupation. It may, of course **include** (such things) but it should not be limited to ...one's source of livelihood (or) identified with one's career."

"What is vocation, then?" asks Fowler. He proposes the following:

“Vocation is the response a person makes ... to the address of God and to the calling to (be in) partnership (with God).”

“(It) involves the orchestration of our leisure, our relationships, our work, our private life, our public life, and the resources we steward, so as to put it all at the disposal of God’s purposes in the services of God and the neighbour.”

(James Fowler, Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian)

That is pretty heavy stuff.

But what it is reminding us of, is that **because** we have been called by God, all of our life is to be lived in grace – in joyful response and thanksgiving to the grace and love of God.

Mother Teresa, among others, says it in a similar way. The story has it that when a young man asked Mother Teresa how he could know what he should do with his life, she responded, “Where the needs of the world intersect with your gifts, there is your calling.” Jesus calls; calls us to follow, calls us to faithfulness, calls us to be like the sower, out there sowing the seed regardless of the results.

The sower is all too aware of the rocks, the trodden path, the birds, the thorns. But the sower sows nonetheless. Our job, our calling, our **vocation**,

is to sow the seed, to serve and love, to worship and praise. Our calling, our vocation, recalls the words of the prophet Micah:

*“What does the Lord require of you,
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8)

“Now after John was arrested . . . “

Jesus walks beside the Sea of Galilee . . . and he calls: Simon, Andrew, James, John, me, you . . .to ventures of which we cannot see the ending by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. We walk forward in faith, trusting in the God who has called us by name.