

“Faith: prepare, strengthen, launch”

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Mark 1: 14-20

Sunday, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009

This last week has been an amazing week. It contains one of the most incredible American experiences in our lifetime. We have seen over 2 million people stand together in the nation's capitol with faces of hope and joy. With the inauguration of the new president, we have all shared the experience of people around us looking for change, talking about it, and then having the change arrive. Our new president is African American, and we did not realize that in our own lifetimes we would live to be part of Martin Luther King, Jr's dream coming true. Similar to the prophets of the Bible, the story of a new day where we all live and work as one people, with a common purpose was described and held up by Dr. King as something that could happen one day soon. But we all have experience to tell us that SOON can take more than a few lifetimes to achieve.

I think it is useful to reflect on what was done to achieve this moment. No one did anything so very out of the ordinary. If we mark the progress of Barack the young boy, the Civil Rights Act of 1965, the open housing marches, the voting, the failure of war, the greed of those who are rich and those who govern, it was all done within the a regular system of government by people who did large jobs or small. Many of us can't point to one thing we did differently along the way. But on the large screen of life, the course toward last Tuesday was set into motion many years ago and we are now at a new place. This experience provides a present time demonstration of prophecy, faithful preparation and strengthening. Here we are at the launching of a presidency where the expectations are high and many, many people have been moved to believe in a common good.

Looking at it through the lens of Christianity, we see how our beliefs about justice, charity, and love have made progress. We looked at all those people on the mall, heard the choked up voices of African American people, of marginalized people, and of people who have participated in the struggle and we were moved. It is a change that offers striking analogy to today's New Testament lesson, Mark 1: 14-20. If Matthew or Mark were here, they might document our experience this week as a new gospel lesson.

In the lesson we have before us there is preparation for the arrival of Jesus. In the previous Bible verses, John the Baptist has been calling out to people, “Repent, The Kingdom of heaven has come near!” John was described as not one of the mainstream in Galilean life. He ate locusts and lived apart. It may be that he and Dr. King were abused by the public for similar kinds of reasons But John had a clear message and some became his followers and they went to the Jordan River to be baptized. One who went was Jesus. And when he did, he was identified by the descending dove as the son of God. This amazing news must have circulated up and down the river. And there seems to have been time for the news to make impact on people and for them to seek the forgiveness they were called to do. Their faith in the future that John described had time to grow. Jesus too was preparing for the work ahead of him, and he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness before he began to do the work he was here to do in a public way. But the Bible tells us that as soon as John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus returned to Galilee so that Isaiah's prophecy would be fulfilled. And

Jesus is reported to proclaim to people that they should “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.” So whatever they might have felt compelled to do to be prepared for the Kingdom of God, they did. When I read these verses about the call to the disciples, I am struck by the word. “immediately.” Jesus says to Andrew and Simon, “Follow me, I will make you fish for people.” The story says, “And immediately they left their nets and followed him. The same thing happened a little farther on when James and John are spotted by Jesus and “immediately he called to them; and they left their father...” It occurs to me that for these four men to go so quickly at the call of Jesus, they must have been thinking about what they would do when the Messiah showed up, and they must have been preparing in some way that gave them strength enough to drop their nets and leave.

I think that that is how faith works. Faith is this small seed of hope and expectation about God’s presence, about how God is at work in our lives and how God’s kingdom (and our lives) will be different with love, justice and forgiveness. We hold onto that faith and do things to help it grow. Most of what we do is unremarkable. But little by little our faith strengthens. We pray a little or a lot. We read the Bible or listen as it’s read to us, and we consider the meaning of what we read. We take small steps toward being the people who are open to God’s word. By our actions we give witness to our faith in God and we learn to share our stories of faith. Each of these activities strengthens us be ready to let God’s presence come more fully alive in our lives.

Strengthening our faith is a process. And can work many different ways. For some our faith is layers of beliefs that we pack onto corresponding beliefs that eventually form the meaning of Christianity. This faith becomes like a well-formed rock that when placed in a large jar of water, no matter how much we shake the jar (or disturb the beliefs) the water stays clear and the rock is unchanged. In this analogy we have constructed a world of faith and practice that comforts us, guides us and makes us secure, but it is also limiting. If new experience doesn’t fit the faith model that people have developed for themselves, they either give up, shut out others who think or behave differently than they do, or they throw the rock away.

For others faith is not such a rock, but a lot of unattached pieces (some as small as a mustard seed) that when they come together they are Christianity and a world of faith and practice that helps one grow and prepare to hear God’s call. When you shake such a faith up in a large jar of water, the water gets cloudy with particles floating around, with new pieces being considered and added. It takes awhile for the water to clear, but when it does, the way the pieces have come together form and reform a valid life in the Kingdom of God. This faith is responsive to the world around it, incorporates new ideas, and strengthens you to be launched into God’s kingdom in a way that works for all time. It’s not so tidy perhaps and what we do to achieve it is fairly unremarkable, but it is the work that is always before us. And as we do it we are able to see the results.

The disciples provide a fine example for how this faith development works in peoples’ lives. Before they met Jesus, they were seekers of God’s truth. Their faith was sufficient for them to hear Christ’s call and leave the work they knew and become disciples to Jesus. They knew what he was talking about in a general way and they were receptive. But in the descriptions of their time with Jesus, we know that their faith journeys were filled with doubts, misdirection and study. We also know that they were a motley crew. Not the band, but a group made up of people with conflicting

personalities, varying backgrounds, and if met with adversity they can work together to overcome adversity. In a traditionally told story, when a motley crew comes into conflict with an organized, more uniform the motley crew will prevail. We don't know that the disciples ever felt that they prevailed. Perhaps like the people of the early civil rights movement, they died with the confidence of having done all they could, filled with all the love and grace that God allows.

But we do see that Jesus called his followers from various backgrounds and traditions. This information reassures us in two ways. First, we are called to follow Jesus and bring Christ's kingdom into our world, but we are not expected to be cookie cutter copies of one Christian archetype. We are quite an assortment, so no wonder we have debates and questions. Second, we are not expected to have all the answers or a doubtless faith. The disciples didn't. They started with sufficient faith to launch them into a new understanding of how God is present in our lives so they could carry on Christ's work in the world. And their faith grew from there. And while now their stories are remarkable in amazing ways and their ministry extended from Galilee to Spain, Africa and Turkey (which is a long walk), it was what they did and said that strengthened their faith; which helped people to understand how to love God. Like Jesus, they overlooked social barriers and included everyone in the God's kingdom. And similarly for us learning to confess our shortcomings and accept forgiveness, to work for justice and peace, to love our neighbors as ourselves and tell our often unremarkable stories of what it means to be a Christian and a person of faith, we are strengthened.

So in the days ahead, when we study the changes in the conversation around race and community, the use of prisons and justice for people arrested as terrorists, the use wiretapping and how to stimulate the economy broken by costly wars; we know we have a situation where greater equality and improvements are possible. We have the undergirding spirit of hope.

When we read the stories of the disciples we can recall the recent day of crowds with hope and shared vision in their hearts and on their faces, and we can imagine that the disciples had a similar moment. And it is in just such moments where faith opens to the Holy Spirit and we are summoned by God to give love and strength to the work that Christ has set before us. That we can be a motley crew of disciples making our way, growing as we share our faith by our not-so large perhaps, but everyday practice of prayer, witness to Christ's forgiveness in the world and offering to be part of the work and fellowship that builds a broad and inclusive community of followers of Christ.