

Sermon Draft

Text: Mark 1:14–20

Sermon: “Jesus is Calling”

Last week we had Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael, today we build on that with his calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John. This is the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, but already he is calling the men who will continue and complete his work. The concept of the call is a powerful connection between this Gospel lesson and the Old Testament Reading from Jonah. We read, **“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you’”** (Jonah 3:1–2). Here we can plainly see the Law being carried on the back of the messenger and prophet. When the Ninevites hear God’s call to repentance through Jonah, they put on sackcloth and ashes and weep in repentance. When God heard their cry and **“how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it”** (3:10).

God looks upon our sinful helplessness too, and through Jonah's word speaks to heal us also, bringing us to repentance and relenting of his anger. The Collect reflects this reality, which makes it potentially useful to highlight in the sermon: ***"Mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us."***

This is always God's ultimate intention when he calls us to repentance whether through Jonah, John the Baptist, Jesus himself, or even us pastors whom Christ continues to call to his ministry today.

God's Law and Gospel are often seen as polarizing actions of God. Nothing could be further from the truth. The application of Law and of Gospel certainly feels different to us, the Law convicts us of our sins, and the Gospel frees us of our sins through the death of Christ. Yet, the feelings of constraint and then relief aren't what the forgiveness of sins is all about.

The more accurate understanding is that the Law is fulfilled by the Gospel (Jesus' life, death, and resurrection)—one preparing, the other fulfilling; not one bad, the other good. This is God assures us of our salvation and fuels the Church.

In a parallel way, the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus are sometimes seen as polar opposites—John fiery, scary, “mean!” Jesus kind, loving, “nice!” In fact, our text today shows that John and Jesus aren't polar opposites, but rather preparation and fulfillment, with a fairly seamless transition of one to the other. As the Gospel fulfills what the Law prepared, Jesus' call fulfills what John's call began.

Leading up to this Sunday, we have had the prophetic voice of John the Baptist calling out of the wilderness to make straight the path of the Lord. In the repentance of our sins, our hearts and minds are prepared for the Gospel. This isn't merely a practice of emotion, but it's creating a thirst in our hearts as one might feel in the desert.

And this thirst is quenched by the baptismal waters that come with the Gospel of the coming Christ.

Our Old Testament Reading this morning tells us about Jonah calling the wicked city of Nineveh to repentance in terms no less certain than John's. After Jonah's famous initial fit and start punctuated by three days in the belly of that great fish he did follow God's call to preach his devastating Law to the city: ***"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*** (Jonah 3:4). Fiery? Scary? Definitely! But "mean"? Not at all.

It is true with both Jonah and John the Baptist that what they preached about God's wrath is real for God's proper place, time, and even person. We ought not feel so restfully comfortable on this side of the cross and resurrection as to believe this false narrative: that we have been able to get away with our sins thanks to Jesus. No, we haven't "gotten away" with anything! We just may think that way if we misunderstand Law and Gospel as bad and good.

“Law = Bad = Getting caught red-handed.” “Gospel = Good = Not getting caught.” This is wrong! The fact is, whether we realize it or not, we are always caught red-handed by God. But God through his spokesmen proclaims the Law so that we will be brought to true repentance. The Gospel is that God’s hammer, which we expected to be coming down, isn’t coming down on us but came down on Christ on the cross. The full weight of the dead and damned lay on Christ’s shoulders until he died, and we now rise again with Christ from the tomb in absolution. The preparation Jonah and John laid down paved the way for Christ to walk the Gospel on the way of the cross.

When Christ comes onto the scene in our Gospel text, we recall the journey we have been through to arrive here. The angel announced to the shepherds the good tidings of great joy. Christ had become one of us, been born of a virgin. Now, today, he calls his first disciples.

What unfolds is not God distancing himself from the ministries of Jonah and John the Baptist in their calls to repentance, but a continuation and a completion, a fulfillment, of them. There is an “and” that connects repentance to faith in Jesus’ merits. Our text reads, **“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’”** (Mark 1:14–15)

Here we find another call for repentance, yet there are three notable differences.

1. It is the Son of God himself doing the calling, and this connects all repentant callings throughout history to God in the flesh.

2. Preceding the call to repentance is a phrase from Christ that we will often hear in the Church Year to come, and it is an everlasting promise from God: **“the kingdom of God is at hand”** (v 15).

Christ even includes these words, ***“thy kingdom come,”*** in the prayer he taught his disciples. The kingdom of God is the coming of Christ in the flesh at birth and at the judgment when he comes to judge the living and the dead.

3. What follows Christ’s call to repentance is a Gospel promise and the exhortation to believe: ***“believe in the Gospel.”*** Here in Mark, we find the first assertion toward faith from the mouth of Christ. This is no small thing, and it is a most pleasant invitation to us!

Our text finally includes another calling from Christ: the calling of Simon, Andrew, James, and John to be disciples, four of the first twelve men to occupy the Office of the Holy Ministry. Jesus calls them into the office in which the very task is to continue Jesus’ ministry Jesus’ call to repentance and faith in the absolution of the penitent.

St. Augustine, the bishop and pastor, once wrote in a Christmas homily, “Everlasting misery would have engulfed us, if He had not taken this merciful form. We would not have been restored to life, had He not submitted to our death; we would have fallen, had He not rescued us; we would have perished, had He not come.” (Augustine, Sermon 185)

This is true for all who are under the Law. It is valid for us, for all who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This is the ministry of Christ. And it is precisely where the ministry of John the Baptist was always pointing:

God, himself from the creation of the world, has thickened his heel for the crushing of the head of the serpent that has accosted us. From this point, all sin, every sin that we have committed, has been our own personal attempt to dethrone God and take from him what is rightfully his. We want his power, authority, and might. We want him off his throne.

And that is just what happened, but not as we would have wanted it, but as we needed. John has proclaimed that the one who would ascend for us is the only one who has come down from his throne. And when the Son of Man comes from his heavenly throne, he comes for us. He comes to be the victor over sin, death, and the devil! (Gaven M. Mize, Awake, You Who Sleep)

Now it is the ministry of the Church and her pastors. What John prepared and Jesus fulfilled is now among us. Jesus' own ministry is among us. We have the pure and unadulterated Gospel of our Lord Christ. The same sweet voice that cried from the manger in the Sundays of Christmas also called the disciples to proclaim the Law and Gospel to sinners. We are sinners in need of the Gospel. Christ has called the likes of four fishermen into his well-loved Church. What Christ was able to accomplish in these men he is able to accomplish through the pastors of his Church today. He forgives our sins and gives us everlasting life.

Jonah and John called their hearers to repentance, and their hearers received the forgiveness of God. Christ calls us to repent and believe, and he forgives us of our sins. Christ also calls pastors to proclaim the Law that breaks us and to speak the words of Holy Absolution. Christ is the one who sees the repentance and forgiveness to completion. Therefore, we can be sure today in hearing the words from this pulpit and Altar that we are as forgiven as if Jesus himself said them. Because Jesus did say them.

Amen