



INAUGURATING JESUS' KINGDOM

Dan Claire

January 11, 2014

We've all had once-in-a-lifetime, drop-everything opportunities. Usually they're not so great. We routinely see or hear advertised, "This weekend only, drop everything and come to our showroom for a once-in-a-lifetime sales event," for a small discount on something mundane, like a kitchen appliance. It's easy to tune out these kinds of drop-everything opportunities.

On the other hand, there are some opportunities that legitimately are once-in-a-lifetime. Maybe it's a chance to meet your favorite actor or musician, politician or author. Or maybe it's how you landed your first internship or job here in Washington, requiring a quick decision and a fast move to the big city.

DROP EVERYTHING AND FOLLOW JESUS

Jesus begins his ministry in Mark 1:15 with a drop-everything opportunity, announcing, "Now is the time." In other words, Jesus is saying, "The moment of opportunity has arrived. Whether you know it or not, it's the moment you've been waiting for all your life."

Not every such opportunity is worth taking. At this point we need more information to discern whether Jesus is offering something really extraordinary. Is following Jesus something that really does require leaving everything else behind? Or is Jesus proclaiming one more run-of-the-mill sales pitch, just another chance in a mundane string of chances, one more "15 minutes could save you 15% or more on car insurance" kind of opportunity?

Jesus goes on to give the reason why this opportunity is so extraordinary: the Kingdom of God has come (1:15). This is Jesus' shorthand way of describing God's restoration of our broken world. All our longings, every good hope or dream for our world, ultimately point to what Jesus calls the kingdom of God. In announcing the arrival of God's kingdom, Jesus is proclaiming that what the Prophets promised for centuries has now come. Why is this a drop everything opportunity? Because the long-anticipated Kingdom of God is now here.

Now, if you're convinced that this is really an opportunity worth seizing, then what do you have to do to seize it? Jesus goes on to describe two steps (1:15): *repent* and *believe*.

Repentance is about turning around. In Mark 1:4-8, we saw people flocking to John the Baptist down on Israel's border at the Jordan River in order to that they had repented of their sins, i.e. they had turned around from whatever had previously captivated their hearts apart from God. Having morally repented, they waded out into the river to be baptized. Then they physically turned around and waded back to the shore of the Promised Land. This was especially significant because the original Joshua led his people through the Jordan River to take possession

of the Promised Land some 1500 years earlier. John the Baptist was preparing the way for a new army to come into the Promised Land and to follow a new Joshua, namely, *Yeshua*/Jesus.

Jesus says (Mark 1:15) that the opportunity of the Kingdom of God is first seized through doing the same thing—repentance. We must turn away from whatever captivated our hearts in place of the Kingdom of God.

But in order to seize this opportunity, Jesus says, we must go a step further. We must also *believe*. Mark and others in the Bible use *believe* rather differently than we use it today. Our understanding of belief today is almost entirely cognitive, i.e. believing is something that we primarily do in our brains. So, for example, I might say, “I believe in sensible gun control.” This is a way of expressing my own thinking about a particular issue, of saying what I *think* about it.

On the other hand, when Jesus calls us to repent and believe in his kingdom, he’s talking to our hearts every bit as much as our heads. As we’ve just learned, repentance means leaving behind whatever captivated our hearts in place of the Kingdom of God. Likewise, believing involves Jesus and his kingdom occupying that same space in our hearts. They’re really two sides of the same coin, one being the negation, the emptying of former loves, and the other being its replacement with a new love.

This doesn’t mean that belief is anti-cognitive or irrational. Rather, it involves our whole persons in ways that include but also transcend thought, akin to how one might go about deciding to get married. In that case, you must be convinced in your head that this person is a wise choice and an appropriate complement to you for a life partner. But it goes without saying that your heart must also be in love. And what’s more—when you become engaged, you must repent, so to speak, of all the other potential spouses out there. You must leave them all behind in order to make a full head and heart commitment in marriage.

That’s very much the sense that we should have when we hear Jesus say, “repent and believe.” Sadly it’s not often presented this way. There are often people who invite Jesus into their heads but never invite him into their hearts. That’s not what Jesus asks, though. It’s not enough to be intellectually convinced that Christianity is true. To seize the opportunity of God’s kingdom requires clearing out and leaving behind our other primary affections such that we wholeheartedly follow King Jesus. That’s what Jesus means when he says to “repent and believe.”

If what I’m saying is true, then we should see it illustrated in Mark’s story. That’s precisely what happens in Mark 1:16-20. Jesus, the new Joshua, begins his march inland to invade the occupied territory of the Promised Land and to repossess it as the beachhead of God’s inaugurated kingdom. As Jesus does, he sees and calls others to join him—first Simon and Andrew, then James and John. They’re not doing anything wrong, per se; they’re simply making a living as fishermen. Yet Jesus presents them with the opportunity of a lifetime: instead of netting fish for their own purposes, they would be netting people for God’s in-breaking kingdom.¹ To respond, they had to

¹ From this point onward, welcoming others into God’s kingdom becomes the responsibility of all Christians.

repent of their own work, i.e. to turn away from it and leave it behind. Then they had to believe in the gospel of God's kingdom by following Jesus and engaging in the work he gave them to do.²

KING JESUS RESTORES US, SO LET'S BRING EVERYONE TO HIM

Mark 1:21-34 might be entitled, "Saturday with Jesus." In this section, as Jesus takes charge in the city of Capernaum, he demonstrates why he's worth following.

After calling his first disciples down by the sea, Jesus moves further inland, into the center of the city. Capernaum is the first city Jesus invades and captures for the Kingdom of God.³ Instead of confronting the Roman soldiers, Jesus ignores them in order to get to the heart of the problem, namely, that the people had lost their love for God. Their hearts of the Jewish people had become occupied long before the Romans occupied their land; if it hadn't been the Romans, there would have been someone else ruling over them. So Jesus takes the battle to the places where occupied hearts can be set free: church, school and home.

In 1:21-28, he goes to the synagogue, which served as both church and school in Capernaum. It was the Sabbath, so all the Jews in the city should have been gathered there. Jesus first taught them, presumably from the Old Testament scriptures about the Kingdom of God. The people were astonished because they hadn't heard anything like it before. The hearts of their own teachers and leaders were pre-occupied with other loves, which meant that their teaching lacked punch. Jesus, on the other hand, had a heart on fire for the Kingdom of God, and his teaching amazed them.

Suddenly a man with an unclean spirit appeared in the synagogue, saying, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God." Mark is a master of irony in his storytelling, and this is another example of his art. All those gathered in the synagogue should have been surprised by a demon-possessed man, and not by authoritative teaching from the Old Testament! Yet they are astonished, while the demons aren't. It is the demons, in fact, who know what we know from Mark's opening sentence (1:1) and from the Father's pronouncement at Jesus' baptism (1:11), namely, that Jesus is the Son of God.

During the past week the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England approved a new baptismal liturgy that drops all mention of the devil and of sin, in the interest of more 'culturally appropriate' language. This is yet another sign that relevance has supplanted the Kingdom of God in the hearts of church leaders there, as it has throughout the western world. Thankfully, Jesus wasn't ashamed of the Kingdom of God when he met the man in the synagogue in Capernaum. Rather, he cast out the demon with a word, thus restoring the man. Unlike the first Adam, who obeyed the voice of Satan in the Garden, Jesus, the second Adam, silenced the voice

² As we'll see in the rest of Mark's story, these first disciples were a lot like those who've only invited Jesus into their heads: they didn't fully believe until after Jesus' resurrection.

³ As Jericho was the first conquest under Joshua, so is Capernaum the first city that Jesus conquers.

of the demons. As a result, Mark tells us, Jesus' fame began to spread, because the unclean spirits *obeyed him*.

In vv 29-31, Jesus finishes out the Sabbath at home with Simon and Andrew, where all is not as it should be, because Simon's mother-in-law is ill with a fever. Again, Jesus acts to heal her, this time with a touch, thereby restoring the woman. Mark goes on to say that she began to serve them. The Greek word for serving used here is *diakoneo*, from which we derive the word "deacon." Mark doesn't use it that often, but it did occur back in 1:13 to describe what the angels did for Jesus in the wilderness, namely serve or minister to him. Jesus will use this same word of himself later to describe his role as the Messiah, when he says, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). Likewise, Jesus taught his disciples that "whoever wants to be first must be last and the servant of all" (9:35). What this shows us is that Peter's mother-in-law was doing exactly what Jesus expects of everyone who joins the Kingdom of God. Jesus expects it of us, because it's what he did for us on Good Friday. So if you're hung up on this little phrase, that Peter's mother-in-law began serving them, it's a very good sign that Mark's story of Jesus is making contact with your heart. The fact that we don't like other people telling us what to do is a sure sign that there's a battle for control within us. Serving others in Jesus' name is what it's all about for us all—both women and men—who repent of our other affections and follow King Jesus with all our heads and hearts. It is a great privilege to be a servant in the Kingdom of God!

In vv 32-34, this amazing, action-packed Sabbath day in Capernaum comes to an end at sundown. Now the whole town is freed up from Sabbath restrictions, so Jesus' growing band of followers goes fishing. In 1:32 "they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons, and the whole city was gathered together at the door." In other words, the day ended with Jesus' followers serving him according to the commission he gave Simon, Andrew, James and John down at the seashore: as fishers of men and women.

Looking back on this long-day with King Jesus in Capernaum, we see several good reasons why the Kingdom of God is a drop-everything opportunity. These include Jesus' amazing teaching, his miraculous healing power over illness and evil, and the way that everyone who joins up with him has a role to play, a ministry to undertake, within the Kingdom of God. Note that everything that Jesus does is restorative, making broken people and institutions and communities whole again. Most drop-everything opportunities seem so destabilizing. But in this case, what Jesus offers does exactly the opposite.

Throughout this episode, Mark emphasizes that faithful disciples of King Jesus serve him by bringing other people to him. As I read this, I couldn't help but think of the early days of our church. We named the church after Jesus' resurrection for a reason, and it's what we kept talking about, proclaiming in word and deed that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." And one by one, we drew others to Jesus.

As we look forward to our next church plant, we hope the same thing will happen again. Our experience has been that church planting is such an effective way to introduce people to the Lord Jesus. God willing, some from Rez will go out to start this new church and will have the privilege of gathering others to come and see. Meanwhile, others will stay to fill the shoes of those who've

been sent out, and there will be a great opportunity to gather others to taste and see at Rez as well.

If we're not genuinely passionate about bringing people to King Jesus, then it's a sign that there's a struggle within our hearts for our affections. If Jesus is genuinely King of our hearts, then we believe (head and heart) that the Kingdom of God is absolutely the right medicine for the people we meet, and we're always praying, always sharing, always giving, always inviting others to come to him. Many of us, myself included, have been half-hearted in this area. I deeply desire repentance and change, such that like Peter's mother-in-law, I'm happy to serve others because I've been healed by the Lord. Let's pray for one another to grow as fishers of men.

KING JESUS' FINDS STRENGTH IN PRAYER, SO LET'S GO FIND HIM.

This section ends in 1:38-39 with Jesus expressing to his disciples his desire to do what he had done in Capernaum throughout all of northern Israel. I believe Mark's point is to say that on subsequent weekends Jesus repeated the same conquest of church, school and home in the other towns and villages in the region. Given the number of places Jesus must have visited, it's pretty exhausting thinking about all the work involved in going from town to town, preaching and healing and dealing with the crowds. Even the most extroverted among us would have tired after doing this for awhile. So where did Jesus and his disciples find the strength to carry on?

Mark reveals the secret to Jesus strength in vv 36-37. There we find Jesus stealing away on a Sunday to worship the Lord. The way Mark describes it hints not only of Easter morning at the end of Mark's Gospel, but also of the Christian worship that Mark would have known on Sundays when he wrote his story. Simon searches and finds Jesus, which is what we also do on Sundays, both when we pray in private, and when we gather for public worship.

Seeing Jesus with his heavenly Father in prayer is yet another reason why following him is genuinely a drop-everything opportunity. That's because Jesus' strength doesn't come from himself; rather, his strength comes from his submission to God the Father. We can trust Jesus' authority because he is under authority himself.

For those of us who are already wondering how we will find the strength to become fishers of men, here's our answer. The source of our strength must be the same as that of our King. As we turn to the Father, he will empower us to serve others in Jesus' name. In fact, I am convinced that this is the key to our transformation in becoming a church that is passionate about, and habituated in, both evangelism and loving the poor. I am convinced that if we become people who regularly pray about these things, praying specifically for people and situations in need, and calling upon one another for help with these prayers, we will see our nets being filled.

I recently had the great privilege of participating in an all-night ecumenical concert of prayer here on the Hill. It was wonderful in so many respects, but above all else I appreciated the strong sense of camaraderie in the work of prayer. We simply don't have the time to pray in this way when we gather on Sunday evenings. But I know that as we make time to pray in this way, that it makes time for other things. It also renews our hearts to return to our first love.