

*“Repent and Follow, Repeat.”*  
*Mark 1:14-20*  
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People can change. This is a good thing. If I don't like something about me, I can say, "I'm not going to live like that anymore. It's time for something different." This is one of the great things about being human. It makes us different from cats and gerbils, and the dogs I pass on my runs on the streets around here.

Out on Buckeye Drive there's a dog that barks every time I go by. The first time I went past it yelled and charged like it was going to attack. But I'm learning which yards have the Invisible Fence. Now I know this dog will only run so far. I can peacefully stride by its yard. But for the dog, it's the same thing every time. I approach, it barks like crazy, I go by, and its doggy ego feels proud for vanquishing the enemy. The dog seems incapable of deciding I'm just that guy who runs by; there's nothing to get worked up about. It can't choose not to bark. But people—we can change.

I've been hearing a lot of change stories lately. I've been sitting down in homes and coffee shops, asking, "How long have you lived around here? What brought you to Christ Church?" I've enjoyed the stories that come in response. If you haven't told me yours, I look forward to hearing it.

Peoples' life stories take such interesting turns. I heard from someone who ended up here because of graduate school; from someone who went to college for business and wound up teaching kindergarten; from someone who, for a lot of life, didn't care much for church, but now can't imagine life without it. Life changes. People change. Sometimes for the better, other times we're not so sure. But wouldn't be strange if all of us stayed exactly the same?

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"The time has come! Change your hearts! Change your lives! The kingdom of God is near." This was first sermon Jesus preached. It's a sound bite sermon. It was Jesus' elevator speech. I can see him walking briskly through Galilee, casting this word to people he passed: "The kingdom is near! Repent, and believe the good news!" And then he just keeps on going.

The words feel urgent, like they want to be said quickly, like there's no time to waste: it's time to change and the time is now. Mark's gospel moves fast. "Immediately" and "at once" are some of Mark's favorite words. This makes for a riveting story but, I have to confess, I like change to come a little slower. I tend to like change. It keeps life fresh and interesting...as long as I'm ready for it. If I need to change something about my life I like to think about...for a week or two...or maybe a couple months...perhaps a year. Come to think of it, if you get back to me in about 5 years I might be ready to change.

This is one of the challenging things about life with Jesus. He's always preaching this "repent" sermon. "Repent" is not a word that waits around. If I come to someone and say, "I'd like to talk with you about making a change in your life," they might hear me out and get back to me sometime about what they want to do. But if I come and say, "Brother, I'm here to call you to repent," they know I mean business and mean it now. It's turn-around time. Tomorrow's too late. Something new needed to start 5 minutes ago.

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Simon, Andrew, James and John must have known Jesus wasn't messing around. I can't believe they did what they did. One second they were on the job, throwing their nets in the sea, the next they were walking after Jesus, away from everything they'd known. "Follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

If I'm in their shoes, this is a pitch severely lacking information. Follow you. Where? Fishing for people. What's that? Unpack this metaphor for me, please. Would you give me an hour to talk things over with Dad? This will impact the family business, see. But according to Mark, there was no conversation along these lines. Jesus said, "Follow me" and off they went.

I don't know if we can get how radical a break these disciples made. When I was dropping Gareth off at school last week I saw a grey truck with a sticker that said, "Three Sons Roofing. Four Generations." I wonder what would happen if a son from generation five said, "You know, Dad, I don't feel called to the roofing biz. I'm going to LA to try my hand at film making." I imagine a hard conversation ensuing.

We don't know how long the Zebedee family had been fishing in Galilee. Probably longer than four generations. Back then the family business got handed on son after son. It was safe and secure, you knew what to do, knew pretty much what life would be. It took big-time gall for Jesus even to ask. "Drop those nets and follow me." I wonder if these words were kind of taboo? If they were, Jesus didn't care--it was repenting time; the kingdom of God was at hand.

And that's another curious thing about this account Mark gives. Simon, Andrew, James and John aren't in obvious need of repenting. They seem not to be like other people to whom Jesus reached out, like that tax collector we're pretty sure swindled fellow Jews; or that woman who, well, you know what she did for a living. Yet neither are they obviously upstanding guys, recognized leaders among the people whose track record in ministry would be an asset to Jesus. They're fishermen. Just regular, working guys. What reason do they have to make such a change?

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I don't know what you see when you look at your life. Do you feel like changes need to be made? If so, what are they? Is it truly "repent" time? Or do you feel like you're mostly okay? Like basically things are pretty good with you. Sure, nobody's perfect but most days your life isn't lived half bad? Like most of the choices you've made you would make all over again?

Either way, this story from Mark's story has surprise. When Jesus preaches, "Repent!" it turns out he doesn't just mean, stop sinning and become a Christian by believing in him. Jesus surely did want people to stop sinning, but when he said, "Repent!" it was like an alarm clock going off. "It's time!" said his sermon. "It's time! Wake up! Here's the kingdom of God!" It was less "turn or burn" and more "heads up!" because a salvo of the grace of God was falling from heaven down to earth.

When Simon, Andrew, James and John left their nets and followed Jesus, it probably wasn't because they wanted to get their lives in order. Mark doesn't actually why they left. Just that they did. And the more they followed Jesus, the more they saw God's kingdom in their midst. They followed Jesus to Peter's house, where Jesus healed his mother-in-law. As they watched her become well they saw the kingdom of God at hand. They followed Jesus through villages where he came close to people most didn't want to go near; when the leper was restored to others the kingdom of God was near.

Every step with Jesus was further arrival in the kingdom of God. Jesus forgave. He shared meals with kinds of people they'd never eaten with before. He gave grace so pure folks got mad. It was like Jesus was living by different rules, like, "Love your enemies and pray for those who torment you."

When Simon and the guys left their nets for Jesus they must have felt really turned around, which is actually what repenting literally means. Spin on your heel and walk in the other way, which, in the case of a disciple, means walking after Jesus.

But here's what I think must have been startling Jesus' first disciples: a lot of the places they followed Jesus were places they'd been before. They hung around Galilee a lot, where they and Jesus had family roots. They went to synagogue like they'd done their whole lives. Sure, sometimes they'd wind up in places where they must have thought, "I'm not sure if we should be here." But for the most part, the backdrop to God's kingdom at hand was the world they'd always known. Except, in the shadow of Jesus and his work, everything had changed.

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In Mark, repenting and following is mostly about keeping pace with Jesus. This means repentance can't be just a one-time thing. Simon, Andrew, James and John said Yes to Jesus by the sea but then they had to keep turning toward him to go where he would go. Their whole life became repentance, not only as they went where Jesus went, but as they learned to do things as he did, and to see the world as through Jesus' eyes.

They kept turning toward God's kingdom among them, even as they walked with Jesus to Jerusalem, where things would end as bad as they could. Every step they took after Jesus was a turning from lives they could have lived, maybe even lives that were easier. By their story Mark seems to saying, repentance is less about turning from doing what's bad as it is about how much of ourselves we're willing to give to God's way in the world.

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There's a story I recently heard that will stick with me for a while. It was told by a career-minded person whose work days were long. The job was worthy but the hours were taking a toll on the family. One night, after getting home yet again when the spouse and kids were in bed, there was a note on the dining room table. It said, "Time to choose."

It seems like the kind of note Jesus would drop: "Time to choose." I mean now. Are you following me or not? Time to choose--which kingdom are you living in, the kingdom of job or the kingdom of God?

I suspect Jesus drops notes like this all over. He puts them on desks at work: "Follow me," by which he would not necessarily mean, I want you to leave you job. He might just be saying God's kingdom is near you whenever you show up to work, so how you do your job can be a way of following him.

I bet there's a stickie from Jesus that says, "Time to choose" on the checkbook and credit card. He's asking that dollars spent reflect mercy, justice, and self-giving love that's God's reign on earth.

Jesus walks through our houses when tempers flare and words start to get hot. He says, "Follow me," and disciples repent and drop those words they're about to say.

"Time to choose" might be the wallpaper Jesus puts on mobile phones, so as we text, read email, and make appointments we might remember this all serves him.

It should not be lost on us, that when Jesus called those disciples to follow they weren't in worship on the Sabbath day. They were at work. They were out in the world.

They were doing things they'd done ten thousand times before. Which says to me that sometime soon Jesus is going to come from out of nowhere and say to us, "Follow me." He might be asking us to show kindness to someone at work we can't stand. He might be asking us to be generous in a way that kind of hurts. He might ask us to speak a word of witness about the hope we have in him. He might just be asking us to open an old wound of the soul and to let his healing come near.

Really, who am I to say what he'll ask? All I know is that Jesus walks briskly through the world asking people to follow. And when he gets to us, we'll have a choice to make. A call to heed or not, a change to embrace or refuse.

But regardless of what we do, one thing is for sure. The kingdom of God is near, and we can't wake up to it too soon. Amen.