

Epiphany Encounters #3 "Buckle Up!"

Mark 1:14-20 & Jonah 3

Sunday, January 21, 2024

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Feelings of urgency flow from both the opening of Mark's Gospel and the story of Jonah. Both stories convey the idea that God's servants are entrusted with an urgent message. There's a sense that God is up to something, and that the time, as Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 7, has "grown short."

Mark zeroes in on Jesus who is fresh from the wilderness. Having heard that John has been arrested, Jesus comes into Galilee proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Mark's typically clipped language and abrupt scene changes evoke feelings of a flight attendant giving take-off instructions. Jesus' proclamation seems to be centered around the message of sit down, buckle up, and get ready.

You probably have not heard about the recent discovery by a team of Biblical archeologists. In fact, I am quite confident that you have not heard about this discovery, which included unearthing a new translation of Mark's gospel. It is believed to be perhaps the oldest and most authentic sources that Mark used, and surprisingly, it sounds a lot like the announcements by flight crews prior to an airliner's take-off. So, you can imagine that this discovery is nothing short of astonishing, though I've heard the best way to understand this text is with your tongue planted against your cheek.

So, thanks to my connections within the world of Biblical scholars, I'm pleased to share with you this brand-new discovery of an ancient manuscript.

"Grace and peace to you, and welcome aboard Good News Airlines Flight #100 with direct nonstop service to the Sea of Galilee. As a reminder, our cruising altitude today will be quite literally out of this world. We are boarding the aircraft according to our trademarked "the last shall be first" seating plan, so if you are one of those persons who has been anxiously lining up at the gate for the past two hours, I invite you to be seated so that we can allow those who are just arriving to find their seats.

"My name is Johnny Baptist, and it is my pleasure to serve you today along with Captain Christ, First Officer Peter and flight attendants Mary Magdalene, and brothers James and John.

Here at Good News airlines, we take seriously the promise that ‘foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests,’ and carryon bags have their place in the overhead bins or under the seat directly in front of you. At this time, we ask that you fasten your seatbelts, and please remember that if you are a Roman soldier, spears, swords, and those funny helmets must be checked as luggage.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please take a moment now to review the safety card which you will find hidden behind the magazine the passengers who were here before you forgot. Please remember that your flight crew is here primarily for your safety, so we ask that you pay attention as they demonstrate the safety features of this Mark 1 aircraft. In the unlikely event of a water landing, James and John will direct you to their father’s fishing boats which are strapped underneath the plane. Also, while Captain Christ is predicting a smooth flight today, should we encounter any turbulence, you will find him sleeping in the back of the plane. If the cabin’s air pressure should change, the Holy Spirit will descend upon you like a dove and you will hear the Captain saying, “You are my beloved passengers, in you I am well pleased!”

“Once we have reached our cruising altitude, we will be coming through the cabin offering complimentary beverages and a small snack of two loaves and five fishes. Welcome aboard!”

I’m glad someone else translated that as my Greek skills are a bit rusty. You’re lucky you got to hear that today, because I am sure that the Society of Biblical Literature will not be reading this at their next annual meeting.

Jesus, the Messiah, not the pilot, shows up in Mark’s Gospel filled with urgency and propelled by the conviction that the time for God’s kingdom has arrived. He arrives with an invitation to follow and instructions that are, perhaps, like the words flight attendants speak each time we get on a plane.

But like those announcements, I fear Jesus’ words have lost their urgency with us. They are so familiar to us that we no longer consider them astonishing. In the words of our Presbyterian Confession of 1967, Jesus’ work of reconciliation was “the supreme crisis in the life of humankind.” He comes knowing that now is the Kairos moment – a time ripe with both opportunity and with challenge.

Yet it’s hard for us to be astonished by anything – especially in January, especially when it is so cold, especially after the rush of the holidays. Epiphany can be a fresh encounter

with God, yet sometimes our ability to see that fresh encounter has become dulled by repetition and familiarity.

Flight attendants worry that no matter how hard they try to be entertaining or friendly, few people pay attention to the words they say. Industry experts say that could be particularly worrisome following two high-profile incidents this month. Both were near catastrophes: a Japan Airlines plane crashed into another plane in Tokyo on January 2, and an Alaskan Airlines 737 had a piece of its fuselage fly off into the air on January 5. In both incidents, lives were saved because of the training and attentiveness of the crew, and the ability of passengers to follow instructions.

Fifteen years ago, we hailed US Airways Captain Chelsey Sullenberger for safely landing a plane in New York's Hudson's River. In reflecting on that moment, Sully Sullenberger told Katie Couric that,

"One way of looking at this might be that, for 42 years, I've been making small regular deposits in this bank of experience: education and training, and on January 15, the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal..."

I think there is something akin to the instructions and training of flight crews in Jesus' words to us today. His appearance, according to Mark, has taken place during a moment of crisis. Yet, as I said, the word Mark uses for time is not *Chronos*, or chronological time, but *Kairos*...an opportune time. *Kairos* can be both an opportunity and a crisis, and the notion conveyed here is that this is a moment when God is about to do something new.

In typical Mark fashion, Jesus' words here are short and succinct. Mark wastes no time getting to the point of the Good News. Jesus comes into Galilee announcing, "the time is now, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Next, he passes by Simon and Andrew, and James and John, and he says, simply, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

And this is where we stop listening. We think, first, that the entire idea of fishing for people sounds more like a marketing scheme than a way to grow closer to God. We then think that being called is a matter of divine intervention, that it only happens to those who are intensely religious, or to the young who are discerning their careers.

In the words of one pastor, we suddenly become people who are "justas" or "wasers." In speaking about a ministry to older adults, the Rev. Keith Albans remarked this week that

too often those of us who are over a certain age tend to dismiss the idea of being called by saying we're "justa" a retired so and so, or that we are "justa" a church member, a mother, a father, a grandfather. He said that we also tend to identify ourselves by saying "I 'wasa' an engineer, or a teacher, or a counselor..." It is as if our entire identity is in the past, he says, making it sound as if we have lost hope for our future in Christ. We are more than "justas" and "wasers."

"How important," Albans asked, "is the notion of agency for your own hopes about aging or for someone you know? Many of today's older people never expected to live to the age they have. Embracing aging means we can think in a wider and more proactive way."

This is the good news: Andrew and Peter were not "justa" couple of fishermen. John and James were more than guys who left their dad in the boat to scrape off the "and sons" label. They were people invited by Christ to look beyond the horizon of the immediate to see what God was about to do.

Jesus' words of invitation come to fishermen who were busy doing ordinary things. He invites them out of the monotony of that old routine into a discovery of the joy that God provides. That is our good news: Christ encounters them in the ordinariness of their lives and calls them into a community of strength and support. Though they are neither powerful nor wise, they are the foundations from which the church is built.

We are baptized, called, and encountered by a God who comes looking for us. Jesus' instructions come not as words of anxious command, but of gentle, determined invitation. He invites those he finds to repent, which means more than simply denouncing sin. He calls them to make a U-turn in their lives, to change directions. To come back toward God, whose grace, mercy, and peace will cause you to be all you were intended to be.

It is a call away from the individualism that says, "I can do this myself," and into a community where we are cherished and needed. My granddaughter Jax has reached that age where she yearns to do everything herself. But then she realizes...life is more enjoyable, better, and more enriching when we join in community. Sometimes it takes a 180-degree turn in our lives to see that.

Jesus comes and stands before us today, saying those ancient words, "Follow me." Yet I wonder if we are truly paying attention. Buckle up. And pay attention: there is plenty of good news to hear.

