

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Third Sunday after The Epiphany  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

We expect the gospel writer Mark to be short with words, to go to the point quickly, and to have a very exact sequence and almost staccato rhythm of events. Mark doesn't disappoint us in today's gospel reading,

Our passage begins with some fairly shocking words: John is arrested. John, the forerunner of Jesus, is imprisoned. Mark's readers would have known immediately the rest of this story, so Mark didn't need to explain. This terse statement however, then gets paired with Jesus proclaiming his message that the "time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is drawn near". Mark expects us to understand the life-giving shift that just happened between John and Jesus.

Did you catch it – that the baton has been passed.

All that we ever know about John the Baptist is that his work is to prepare the way for Jesus. His message, his baptisms, his preaching is all designed to break open the ground so that the hearts of his hearers may be prepared for the Messiah, who is yet to come.

In our story, Jesus has come and with his statement in today's gospel passage, he ushers in the new age. Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near". The reign of God has moved from a future event into a present tense. We are no longer waiting; it has come.

This is a huge shift in perspective and one that has lasting implications in our lives.

As I was doing the thinking part of my sermon preparation this week, as one of my apparently necessary times of procrastination and intentional distraction making, I checked my Facebook account. I saw a post from one of you which said, "One day, God will make all things right." My immediate response was, yes that's true, One day, God will make all things right, because God is making all things right right now.

The baton passing between John and Jesus, when John is confined and Jesus is set free to proclaim the reign of God, as being now, is what makes that statement true.

As one of you shared of one of your transformative moments with God as being when you marked the shift in your heart, and your mantra shifted from "Don't worry, everything will be okay" to "everything is OK". There is no need to worry. Everything is okay, because Jesus is in the present moment.

We don't live our lives in hopes of meeting Jesus. We live our lives because we have met Jesus. We don't do good works so that we might be redeemed; we are redeemed, and therefore our response is to do good works. Jesus, in his proclamation today, tells us that truth.

This reordering of how we think of time, and what comes before and what comes after, is rooted in our understanding of Kairos, or God's time, when the past, present,

and future seem to be conflated, into one moment, this moment. This shows up in our understanding of our Eucharistic celebration to be a time of anamnesis- when we not only recall an event in the past, the Last Supper, but when we actually enter into, come into the present moment with Jesus around that table with his friends, and are forever connected in the paschal mystery of Christ. The past, present, and future come together in that moment.

John passed the baton to Jesus, drawing the future into the present. Through our sacraments, Jesus passes the baton to us, drawing the past into the present, where God is, here and now.

This is important to us, because also in our passage Jesus says to the fisherman who are hauling in their nets, “come, follow me”, and we now have the context to know that Jesus is saying that very imperative to us – come, follow me, now.

This is not some future event that we can choose to ignore or get to at a more convenient time. Nor is this imperative something that happened to those disciples in the past. Jesus is saying to us, right now, “Come, follow me.”

Where do you think Jesus is asking us to follow?  
Isn't it a great question to explore together on a Sunday when we have our Annual Meeting? Where is Jesus asking us to follow?

Now we can look at discipleship, the following of Jesus, as a task, as something to do in response to Jesus' call. Many of you may have something very specific in mind, something you need to do in order to answer Jesus call. It may involve a shift in your occupation, like that which occurred to our fishermen, or it may be a passion or hobby you know you need to explore right now, or it may be a book on your nightstand which you are suddenly called to read which will give you a new perspective on life.

Some of us may have discerned something very specific, which our parish is called to participate in. This may be of a vision of our outreach including our healing ministry, or a new way to bring the community into our parish life, or a way to help our parents form their children in faith, which includes, but is not limited to being here in church school each Sunday morning. This is good that we're thinking and discerning how our parish can respond to Jesus' invitation, “Come, follow me.” I want us to share these ideas at our annual meeting, when I pose the question to you: What is our purpose as a parish? Where is Jesus calling us?

So we can look at discipleship as a task as something to make to happen.  
And we can look at discipleship as an identity, as something at our core, as something we live out in the way we are to and with one another. When we view discipleship as an identity, we are responding to, what I believe, is a universal call to holiness.

When we were baptized, this is actually what we promised to do. We promised to continue in our prayer practices and our study of our scriptures, and our sharing in the Eucharistic community, so that we can live into the holiness, which is ours, because of Christ.

Once again, the idea of Kairos comes into play: we don't become holy because of our practices; we are holy because of Christ, and through our prayer practices, and study, and sharing the broken bread, we live out of and into our holiness.

Likewise, in our baptismal covenant, we promise to do the mission of Christ, by respecting the dignity of all, by striving for justice and peace, for seeking and serving Christ in all persons and loving our neighbor. We don't do these actions to find Christ, but because Christ has already found us, and we live in response to the Christ within.

But the important part about discipleship as an identity is that when we engage in the activities of prayer, study, and mission, we move into that sacred place of Jesus; where the message of God and the messenger of God became the same. When the one proclaiming becomes the proclamation. We can do this. We too can enter into this place where we move, and live, and have our being in Christ, to such an extent that the real presence of Christ is experienced in our midst. This is when discipleship is our identity.

When there is no separation between the Christ within and the Christ we present to the world, we are obedient to Jesus' call to follow him. For those of you who have been reading *The Rule of St. Benedict*, you will recall that Joan Chittister writes this week about obedience or actually the shape disobedience can take.

She writes: it is so easy to begin the spiritual life with a light heart and then one day, drowning in the sea that is ourselves, refuse to go another step without having to be dragged. We ignore the teachings or demean the teachings. We do what we are told, of course. We come to the meetings or keep the schedule or go through the motions of being part of the community, or part of the family or part of the staff, but there is no truth in us and we weigh the group down with our complainings. We become a living lamentation. We become a lump of spiritual cement around the neck of the group. This, Benedict says, is not obedience, not listening to God. This is only compliance, and compliance kills, both us and the community, whose one heart is fractured by those who hold theirs back. Real obedience depends on wanting to listen to the voice of God in human community. "

Our identity, our shared identity as disciples in community is thwarted; the living Christ within does not find expression in our lives, when we are compliant, but not obedient to the call to follow Jesus, in community. It's much easier to believe our identity is as a disciple when we're by ourselves. In community, it's a lot trickier.

However, part of our corrective to return to this identity of a disciple, which we have been given in our baptism, is to pay attention to what we need to leave behind in order to follow. If we think we have nothing to leave behind, it's probably a sign that we actually have much to leave behind, that there is something we're holding onto rather tightly, something we treasure, yet something we need to let go of. It could be as the fisherman, our occupations, the expectations of our families, our stable life, our status in the community, or our wealth. It can also be our self-reliance, or actually our nostalgia; of the way things were, of our past, which we treasure sometimes more than our present. Jesus, today, is inviting us to come from the past into the present.

I have a close friend from the parish I previously served, whose name is Karen, who is a widow from 911. I visited her a few weeks ago and saw the baton being passed, from the nostalgia of the past, into the present moment in Christ. I am certain there will not be a day, an afternoon, an hour, a single moment, when she won't wish her husband were still alive. That's just her reality. But the shift I saw her take was for her to release her hold on that nostalgia, of that time when Rich was still alive as the only time that she too could be completely alive. After 13 years, she has moved into Kairos time, God present in the moment time, when she could see a happiness, no doubt a different kind of happiness, to belong to her now. I think she shifted from thinking "One day God will make all things right." To saying, Today God has made all things right. She tapped into the Christ within, and found her home there.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus commanded their followers to repent and to believe. Repentance means reorienting our lives, re-establishing priorities, knowing you can live your life differently, and it can, and actually must, begin in this moment, right now.

As we begin this New Year together, let us live more fully into the holiness, which is already within us. May the Christ within be what we express to each other as we deepen our understanding of who we are as a community. May we let go of what we need to and may we embrace boldly that which Jesus is calling us into. For let us remember, in spite of our struggle to yield to God's call, Jesus' invitation to follow him echoes in our hearts and souls. since it is already there. We may find ourselves slowly yielding to the possibility of grace and forgiveness as well as to the lure to discover a new direction for our lives. When we find that way, we look for no other, for we have become God's own, once again.  
Amen.