

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 1:14-20

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After Jesus' temptation and testing in the wilderness, he inaugurates his mission. This is the story about that inauguration. It begins with a brief summary of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. This takes place after John was arrested, so the implication is that John was Jesus' mentor and that the baptism of Jesus by John was a transformative experience in Jesus' life. The note about John's arrest is also a little harbinger of what is to follow for Jesus. The allusion that begins Jesus' proclamation is an allusion of what is at stake. This is the beginning of a life-and-death battle with the powers of evil.

Jesus' proclamation is of a new age, a new time in history. The spirit of this story is the fulfillment of hope for a new government in the world, a new kingdom that will transform the balance of power in the world. Jesus' proclamation is the fulfillment of six hundred years of waiting by the people of Israel. This new government is imminent, near at hand. The response that he invites from people is to turn their heads around. That's what "repent" means. It means to literally turn your head in a different direction so that all things can be seen and experienced in a new way. The spirit of this proclamation is an invitation to see with new eyes.

Jesus' words are also a verbal thread that connects with the story of John's baptism. John came proclaiming a baptism of **repentance** for the forgiveness of sins. Because of its context, this turning around is also related to the forgiveness of sins. It is turning away from the sins of the past so that people can begin a new life. At the core of this repentance is belief and confidence in this new age and the good news. Jesus invites his listeners, that is those who are hearing Mark's story, to believe in the good news, the *euangelion* with which the Gospel begins. The gospel is good news **about** Jesus. It is also the good news **of** Jesus, that is, the good news that Jesus proclaims. Jesus' gospel of God is the announcement of a new balance of power. Whether this means a new government and a free and independent Jewish state or a new balance of power in the spiritual universe is ambiguous at this point in the story. But the immediate reference is to the power of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation that Jesus recognizes and sets loose in the world.

After this initial proclamation Jesus goes walking through Galilee. Mark has announced that Jesus is the Messiah at the very beginning of the story: "the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Christ (the Messiah)." With previous messiahs such as Saul and David, their first step is to recruit an army (see for Saul, I Sam. 11.5-15; 13.1-4; for David, 17.31-54; 23.1-43; 30;1-31. That was the first thing they did because they couldn't go into battle and redeem Israel unless they recruited an army. So Jesus also begins by recruiting followers but rather than calling an army, Jesus calls disciples. The fact that the four young fishermen left everything and followed is a surprise and a sign of Jesus' authority.

This story evokes memories of Elijah and Elisha as well as Saul and David. During his sojourn at the mountain of God, after the wind, the fire, and the earthquake, Elijah stood in front of the cave and heard the voice of God telling him what to do. This was Elijah's testing in the wilderness. He came back from the mountain and put his mantle over Elisha and called him. Elisha slaughtered his oxen and left everything and followed Elijah. (I Kings 19:19-21) It was a sign of Elijah's authority as the prophet of God who recruits a prophet who will succeed him. Mark's story has the same spirit. These four guys—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—sense who Jesus is and, like Elisha, they leave everything and follow him.

The telling of this story needs to embody the authority of Jesus and the wonder that the four leave everything and follow him. The story is also a confirmation of Jesus' identity as the Messiah, who goes into battle not against the Philistines but against the powers of evil in the world. The story has the spirit of the toughness that recruiting an army requires, whether for physical or spiritual battle. However, while the metaphor of Saul and David is in the background, the most immediate background throughout this first part of Mark's story, beginning with John the Baptist, is with Elijah. Remembering and perhaps even retelling Elijah's story will help in the discovery of the spirit and tone of Jesus' story in Mark.