

Mark 1:14-20
January 24, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

I have shared many stories from a family vacation to Glacier National Park two years ago; but I do not believe I have shared this one, at least publicly in a sermon. We began early in the morning for a 13-mile hike and finished up mid-afternoon. If you are at all familiar with Glacier, we parked our car at the Logan Pass visitor center. This is the highest point on the famous Going to the Sun Road that takes you from the east side to the west side of the park as you pass over the Continental Divide. Rather than an out and back hike, our end point was at an area called the Loop nearer to the base of the mountains on the west side. Thus, to get back to the car we would have to take one of the shuttles up to Logan Pass. The problem is the shuttles fill up very quickly and often there may be only 1 or 2 seats available. We sat and several shuttles came and went that were completely full or had spots but were heading the opposite direction. Finally, a shuttle approached that had an empty seat. Thus, the decision was made that I would go up the mountain, get the car and head back down to pick up Amanda and the kids. So, upon arriving at Logan Pass, I hurriedly exited the shuttle, got in the car, and headed back down to the Loop. However, as I drove by there were no members of my family. Now, Glacier in August is extremely busy, so I thought it very possible I just missed them. Thus, I turned around several miles down the road and came back up. The parking lot at the Loop was full, but I pulled in, circled through the lot and there was no site of my family. I could not quite figure out where they would have gone. The plan was for them to stay put. For the life of me, I could not imagine they caught another shuttle and headed up to Logan Pass. Our hotel was further down the mountain on the west side, so I thought just maybe a shuttle came by that had empty spots and they went to the hotel. So, that is where I went but no luck. I went to the visitor center at the entrance to the park on the west side. No luck. I returned to the hotel to check and again, they were not there. I decided to wait patiently thinking that if I headed back up, they may be heading down, and we would pass along the way and we would never connect. You may be saying, why did you not just call them? Well, within the park

cell phones are essentially useless as far as making a call or using some sort of location device as there simply is no service. After an hour or so, a park ranger drove by me and I flagged her down. She told me to stay put as this happens quite often. She would drive up the mountain to see if she spotted my family and send them down. In the meantime, I tried to patiently wait but as minute after minute and eventually hour after hour ticked by a great deal of fear and anxiety set in. There were so many unknowns, such as, where were they? Were they together or had they separated? Had something happened? Why had they not come down? Finally, after 4 or so hours and on the last shuttle down the mountain, they arrived. Indeed, all the unknowns finally became known. They had gone up the mountain on the next shuttle following the one I took and thought I had seen them get on. One came back down to the Loop to wait for me while the other 2 stayed at Logan Pass, while I stayed put as the ranger advised me to.

Life is full of unknowns. Uncertainties. Nearly every aspect of our lives over this past year, since the onset of COVID-19, has had over it the cloud of the uncertainty and left us continually asking questions. What next? When will this be over? When will I get a vaccine? Is the cough I have had COVID, allergies, or just a cold? When will be able to worship in-person again? The answer to many of our deepest ponderings and questions is quite simply, no one knows. Not knowing puts us in a precarious position that may further intensify anxiety we all have been experiencing.

As a small group discussed our gospel passage on Monday one point of observation and discussion centered around all the “unknowns” in this passage. For example, did Simon and Andrew know Jesus prior to his invitation to follow him? How about James and John? Had they heard of Jesus thus perhaps making their “immediate” departure from their vocations as fishermen and their families seem more palatable? Was there time to say good-bye and put things in place to continue to afford financial stability and security for the families dependent upon them?

There are so many unknowns and it is tempting to fill in the empty spaces with assumptions. At times, I get uneasy with the unknowns. I want those unknowns answered because perhaps it may ease some of my angst or anxiety with the text.

On face value, it appears Mark had no problems leaving out some of these details. As Al alluded to last week, Mark is adept at getting straight to the point. For the shortest of the four gospel accounts, Mark does not have time to dwell on the formalities of whether the disciples knew Jesus ahead of time, had heard of him, or whether they were able to hug their families and say their good-byes.

So, when I was finally able to allow myself to move beyond dwelling on the unknown, I was then able to focus on what is known and this appears to me to be what Mark is an expert at as he tells the “good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1) And two things that we do know stand out to me.

First, in Jesus the kingdom of God has come near and that is good news. Second, Jesus wastes no time inviting others to come alongside and join him in ushering in the kingdom of God.

We may wonder at times just what does this kingdom look like? Jesus quickly asserts that an identifier of the kingdom is that it is marked by good news. Good news for these ordinary fishermen Jesus invites to follow him. Good news for the man with an unclean spirit Jesus and his 4 new followers will encounter in Capernaum in verse 21. Jesus, having authority as only God does, rebukes the spirits that have bound this man for many years setting him free. Good news for Simon’s mother-in-law they meet in verse 30 who lay in bed from a debilitating fever. Jesus takes her hand, lifts her up, the fever departs, and she too begins to serve Jesus. Good news for the many who in the wake of this healing also come to Jesus and he rebukes demons and provides healing. Good news for the many neighboring towns Jesus and his disciples went to in verse 38 to proclaim the message God’s kingdom has come near. Good news for the leper, who in verse 40, comes to Jesus begging to be made clean. When no one else would touch him, Jesus chooses otherwise and restores the man not only to health but also to community. Given new hope, new life, he responds just as Jesus calls those first disciples to – by proclaiming this good news and spreading the word for all to hear.

In the cloud of uncertainty and the unknown, people seek out a beacon of light. They search for a hidden morsel of hope. They cry out for someone to hear their

plea for help. They scratch and claw looking for a foothold of certainty to cling to. Sometimes we grasp at the wrong things and they give way. Other times we are led to wells that run dry. Or we may see an image on the horizon, but it is just a mirage that quickly fades away.

Not so with Jesus. He is that beacon of light. He is that morsel of hope. He is that listening ear. He is that strong foothold that will never falter. In a world of unknowns, Jesus is the great known. The kingdom of God is near in Jesus. It is near to those ordinary fishermen invited to partner with Jesus in kingdom work. Near to the man with an unclean spirit. Near to the woman with a fever whom Jesus interlocked hands with and helped her to her feet. Near to the leper Jesus says yes to and lays his hands upon. Near to you who are bound by the yoke of uncertainty and the fear of the unknown. Near to you who are in the grip of anxiety. Near to you who wonder if anyone is listening. Near to you who grieve. Near to you who tire under the strain of an addiction. Near to you who are isolated. Near to you who have lost a job. Near to you who have become teachers and caretakers. Near to you are exhausted. Near to you who are in quarantine. Near to you whom have no one else to hold your hand right now. Jesus is there. He is holding your hand.

Whatever it was that may have been happening in the life of Mark's community, he wants them to know, to remember, to trust, to live into the reality that God has drawn near in Jesus. This is good news! Such good news that Jesus does not want to keep it to himself. His first move is to go out and find others to come alongside. To experience and share this good news. To follow him and become partners with him in doing God's work.

Jesus is the one who sees. He saw Simon and Andrew. He saw James and John. He is the one who speaks, invites, and calls, "Follow me." He is the one who knows that which we need. He knows who we are. Whatever unknowns we may have in our life be they unknowns about this passage, faith, God, this pandemic, the state of our nation or world, what the future holds, etc. it seems to me that Mark may be calling his readers to cast them aside and simply focus on what is known. Trust in the authority of the one sent by God. Trust that he sees you, loves you, cares for you, hears you, and invites you to follow. Trust that just as he leads those

disciples so does he lead you. He leads us. Trust, even when it is difficult to see, the kingdom of God is nearby. “Know this” says Mark to his community. More importantly, “know this” says Jesus, the Son of God, to the world God loves. Amen.