Sermon on Epiphany 3B 2018
(Mark 1:14-20; Jon 3:1-5; 1 Cor 7:29-31)

I know this is arguable but I’ve always thought paratroopers are given one of the hardest jobs a soldier could have.

Regular troops have the advantage of covering fire; special ops the element of surprise but the paratrooper, well he (and now she) is dropped behind enemy lines without, usually, too large an element of surprise, his or her chute basically a statement of macabre humour, “I’m over here, aim just below the big puffy thing that is floating so cheerily, so slowly, so steadily.”

And of course, many do pay the ultimate sacrifice even before their feet touch ground.

It may seem a strange introduction or analogy to begin our year of engaging Mark’s gospel but out of the four gospels, Mark’s most obviously begins in the middle of things: no birth story, no singing angels, no setting of the wider historical scene, or at least minimally, but we are, if you will, dropped in behind enemy lines and the enemy is shooting.

We meet Jesus, Mark wants to say, not from the comfort of the armchair or the pew but in the middle of life’s mess, life’s dangers.

This strange way of writing sets us off balance; we’re not quite sure how to react: do we imagine that these stories are attacks on our lifestyle or a call forward into something like a promise?

The beginning of today’s reading is classic to Mark’s approach, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God…”

It’s hard to find an analogy for this; maybe something like announcing your candidacy just after your chief of staff or political mentor, who has introduced you to the wider public, is indicted for treason.

I guess that’s actually happened this past year in the U.S. so I guess that’s not a good analogy!

More personally, it may be like saying in the midst of economic ruin or grief, “now the good times are about to begin!”

I’m fumbling here because it really is strange: the elitist politics of the day have just silenced the prophet of equality, the popular hope of the people and Jesus says, “don’t be fooled, God’s right here; right beside you, don’t miss it!”

If Mark’s way of presenting Jesus is near the truth then you and I may need to look at events in the world and in our lives from a different perspective!

It means we can’t merely consider the surface of things, our immediate feelings, the things happening in and around us and those we love.

It means that mashed up with whatever is going on there, the good and the bad, is a radical nearness of God’s activity and desire

“the time is fulfilled: the time is right and the time is now!”

Bombarded with so much negative information we may find this hard to grasp, let alone feel at our emotional core.

One of the disconcerting things about Mark is that he doesn’t try to prove any of this upfront; rather, he invites us to take the plunge and discover, in the midst of things, whether the grand claim of Jesus that God’s reign is at hand is really true.

So, let’s play along with the existential risk; what if it is true, what then? How might we connect with “the time is right, the time is now?” Mark helps us by means of two short stories.

Jesus encounters two sets fishermen, Simon and brother Andrew, James and his brother John; both sets of brothers in the middle of things, in the middle of their day, literally, casting or mending their nets and Jesus says to them, “follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

And Mark says, in his unique style, “And immediately they [Andrew and Peter] left their nets and followed him.”

And just to make sure we get it, Mark ramps up rhetoric for James and John, delivering the equivalent of an emotional gut-punch, “Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

I mean who does this? This I can pretty much guarantee, no one in this room! And yet this is the story that Mark offers us as his first vignette of discipleship!

I shouldn’t say “no one;” let me ask the question; has anyone here ever done anything similar?

Of course it doesn’t work this way! And here’s the thing, it certainly didn’t in the ancient world either where permanence of place and family ties were even more revered than in our time and place.

We’ll see that Mark repeatedly uses this word “immediately” throughout his gospel, not just in the two stories in today’s reading. As commentators note, though it has some continuance with our own use of that word which means “right now” in present-day English, for Mark it also was a way to bring attention to the fullness of time and the possibility of our cooperation; it’s his way of saying “snap out of your day-dreaming and pay attention!”

“Don’t put off your cooperation with God the way you might other invitations: take it seriously and respond as quickly and as fully as you can!”

This is what repentance means! It means, first, paying close attention to Jesus’ words and actions; it means taking seriously what Jesus has to say about our lives, our sins and our goals.

Sometimes the toughest stuff, the most difficult repentance is hearing that we have loads of potential that has not yet, but could be, realized!

If you dislike the work potential, substitute “living.” Sometimes the most difficult way God asks us to change our mind is about where we think we’re going with our lives; we settle into routines, and I’m not necessarily talking about eating the same kind of breakfast cereal every day;

we settle into thought patterns, ways of treating other folks, ways of imagining our role in church or our community and sometimes Jesus puts his foot up on the gunwhale of our little boat and says in effect, “there’s more living for you to do; come follow me!”

“And I say that to you because you are a beloved person in whom God is well-pleased!”

To truly change our minds about *that* means that we won’t settle for just “putting in time;” that in whatever limited way we might be able to, we will find ways to cooperate with Jesus behind enemy lines.

What might that mean? Let me suggest, and this is how I want to end today, that the time is right, the time is now for courage.

The time is right, the time is now for *your* unique courage practiced in your unique way! There is now one-size-fits-all, but there is a fit for you, a Spirit-directed “come follow me” offered to each of us!

Some of you are more intuitive, your path of courage is approached by asking yourself, “what does my gut tell me?” “What is Christ calling me to pay attention to?” The time is right, the time is now!

Some of you are called to a creative courage, to put aside falsehoods that have settled on us like mouldy wet blankets and begin to believe that you have the capacity to translate bold ideas into action. The time is right, the time is now!

Some of you are called to a moral courage, to freshly matching your principles with your words and actions; standing up for those who have been mistreated.

I’ve been surprised that God has called me to stand up for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people in the city of Abbotsford. I grew up as a Mennonite in this town and I’m straight.

I don’t do this “standing up” in a public way but God keeps bringing these precious people to my door. I’ve become convinced that this is a moral issue of great importance;

that Christian theology and the Scriptures have been massively misinterpreted in hurtful ways regarding human sexual identity and that the Church must repent or, not for the first time, be found opposing God’s Spirit as it did with slavery, as often still does regarding women’s roles.

That is my position; if you differ, I’d love to dialogue with you. As I said last week; God’s light comes as we open to each other. I’ve come to recognize that all significant social issues must, from the Christian perspective, be approached by faith; that means we are all called, on whatever issue, whether our politics or our social positions weigh it in terms of the Gospel and then take a stand based on moral courage always keeping in our hearts the Great Commandment. The time is right, the time is now!

Some of you are called to emotional courage, to hard forgiveness, or intellectual or social courage, I’ve run out of space. My time for sermonizing may up, but your time is now!