

3 Epiphany Getting Safely Out of the Boat The Rev. Brian E. Backstrand

19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. Mark 1

One summer weekend, when I was home from college, my parents and I joined some friends for a weekend on Puget Sound in the State of Washington. Both of us had open runabouts with outboards, about 17' long. We launched them at the southern tip of Puget Sound and motored up to Gerald Cove State Park where we docked. I was in the forward part of our boat, digging around for something when I happened to look up and see Burt, our family friend in the boat just ahead. He was all stretched out, leaning over the gunwale and reaching reaching for the dock while stern of his boat slowly but inexorably was drifting. Drifting. Drifting *away* from that self-same dock.

Something had to give.

It did. All of a sudden, Burt was head down, legs in the air, and into the cold waters of the Sound he went. I remember seeing the quixical and fearful and frozen expression of his 12 year old son Howard as his dad disappeared.

We did not have to wait long for Burt. It seemed as though Burt came straight up from those cold waters. He came straight up, grabbed the gunwale and then pulled himself up and over. Into the boat he flopped.

After things got sorted out, I looked across the dock to see a man emerge from a large older impressive yacht of about 45 feet. It had varnished topsides and a white double-planked mahogany hull and it dwarfed our small boats. The man calmly stepped to the dock just about the time that Burt, dripping wet, managed to make the same transition himself. They met in the middle. The man, a member of the Everett Washington Yacht Club, stretched out his hand and said in a loud voice, *Welcome to the Hell Divers' Club*. It turned out that he had missed a dock himself at one point or another and that the yacht club had a special designation for those who somewhere, sometime found their way into the water while attempting to make a transition.

So when I read this text, I begin thinking of transitions. *20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.* Transitions. Getting out of the boat.

In following Jesus, how do we get out of the boat? How do we make a transition from the boat to dry land? How do we handle transitions -- both in our own personal lives and in the lives of organizations, including our two churches?

We may want to argue that nothing is changing in the lives of Trinity churches, but it surely is -- just as it is changing in our own personal lives. In our Gospel lesson, the change is highly dramatic and charged. Those mending the nets are stirred by Jesus' presence and words--stirred so deeply they appear from Mark's account to act spontaneously and freely in response. They do not appear to think or hesitate at all but simply get out of the boat, leaving nets, father, hired hands behind.

But we also know that change can be slow. That it can move almost without detection. That in fact, just like Burt's boat, it may not even be accurately perceived.

Our two organizations, Trinity churches, exist in response to the Gospel. And we know that in following and responding to the Gospel there are many transitions to be made. Some are dramatic and seem to flow effortlessly just like the disciples before us today. But others may be more difficult. We may overestimate the growing gap between boat and dock like Burt did. We may be over-confident and refuse to count the cost. Or...we may become fearful and cling to the past until the opportunity for change disappears.

When I came here two years ago and more, both you and I were faced with transitions. You had to adjust to me and I to you. And we had to figure out how best to work together. We had to change and adapt and interact. The two churches had to accept a new reality that we were bound together in a new relationship. Was it just a practical decision to work together? To bring our two congregations into a new relationship? Or was God speaking to us about getting out of the boat? In coming together, was there just a practical organizational shift? Or was--and is--the Spirit of God speaking to us about new ways of following? New ways of working together. New ways of discovering mutual mission? New ways of developing mutual ministry?

Our Psalm this morning advises us: *8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. (Selah).* In making this transition that is continuing, we are asked to trust, to view the transition that we are in, in terms of working together not just from an organizational but from a faith perspective. As we step out of the boat from the experience of previous years when we functioned independently, we are asked now to explore and risk envisioning who we might be together as the Body of Christ. I believe that we are being asked to discern through prayer-- through pouring out our hearts before the Holy One--- our mutual mission and ministry.

One such ministry is our youth program. Here is an opportunity--a transition that we might make together. How can we educate our youth? How can we reach out to other kids? How can we take advantage of summer camping programs, for example. What might youth events look like in the year ahead? What might we do--together?

Another ministry that we have long anticipated is now directly before us. I am pleased this morning to welcome Susan Schlager and to recognize her presence in our midst as our Faith Community nurse. I encourage you to say hello both during the peace and following our service. Our Faith Community Nurse Committee is excited that Susan has joined with us. Here too is a great opportunity for both churches to come together as Susan reaches out to us to help us build connections and awareness of wholistic health that unites mind, body and spirit.

This too is an important dimension of who we might be as we transition into working more effectively together.

But sometimes in thinking of my experience at Gerald Cove I also begin to wonder: What would happen if Burt had waited? He took a chance when he reached for the dock and he failed. At least momentarily. And he became the subject of some humor. This morning I want also to salute his risk-taking. It is the risk-taking that can sometimes paralyze us. After all, faced with transitions in our lives or as churches, it is easy to wait and analyze and consider and reconsider and raise objections while the boat slowly drifts away from the shore and the presence of Jesus standing before us there.

It will be easy NOT to work together. To define territorial boundaries. To refuse to engage in the years ahead and we should understand just how easy it is to shrink back -- even though we have worked together superficially and have done a good job so far.

But if we are convinced that we truly are *called* to work together, *called* to find ways to encourage and support one another, *called* to build some new structure so that we can share ideas, grow spiritually, reach out in mission, share gifts and talents. If we are truly called, what might our future look like?

Today hopefully we will begin discussing possibilities.

But I am unwilling to leave this Gospel text without making one additional comment. In today's world, it is very difficult to read this text without acknowledging the obvious fact that all of the characters in Zebedee's boat are male. All of the twelve disciples that are so frequently featured in the Gospels are male. The well-known phrase *fishers of men* carries with it a male influence. What does this say to us?

So before we close, consider these references to women followers that we must not overlook. When Jesus is crucified, there are women who also got out of the boat of their ordinary lives and followed him. Courageously. And towards the end of Mark's Gospel they are mentioned at the crucial point of his suffering love:

“There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him (“served” *diakonein*) when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.” Mark 15:40-41

And there were many other women... All of us-- men, women, teens, youth-- have to learn how to make the transition to following Jesus. If we have had a dramatic Gospel reading today, let us also recognize that following is a decision that we have to make, not once, but daily. It does not have to be dramatic. But it has to be sincere.

And so, today, together as two churches, individually, Jesus comes before us just as he surely addressed those in the boat mending nets. Jesus comes before us and issues his command and his invitation-- *follow me...*

Mark 1:14-20

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Psalms 62:5-12

5 For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. 6 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. 7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. (Selah) 9 Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. 10 Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them. 11 Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, 12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

29 I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, 30 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, 31 and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

The opening weeks of the new year and the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday are the temporal context in the culture for the account of Jesus' coming to Galilee, preaching the good news of God and enlisting four men to follow him.

This episode in Mark follows directly after the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. He goes to Galilee, and there he proclaims the "good news of God", "gospel of God," "*evangelion* of God." Jesus' first sermon is short, memorable, and direct. Time is at a crisis point. Events in the past have gathered to the point of culmination, and the "kingdom of God" is approaching. His words shed light backwards on the prophecy from Isaiah, the work of John the baptizer, and the divine voice and vision at Jesus' baptism, and they shine forward to the deeds of Jesus in the rest of the gospel.

As John does, Jesus proclaims, "repent." And he preaches "believe in," or "have faith" in, the good news. The mysterious phrases, "kingdom of God" and the "good news," introduced at the opening of the gospel, will be opened up and embodied in the story that follows. People whom Jesus encounters throughout the countryside will display different dimensions of "faith" (the friends of the paralyzed man, Jairus, the synagogue leader, the bleeding woman, the father of the epileptic son, and Bartimaeus, the blind beggar).

With brevity the text sets the scene and introduces the brothers, first Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, and their profession "for they were fishermen." Jesus' straightforward imperative, "follow me" is finished with the odd formulation, "I will make you fish for people." This narrative in Mark shows a story from the life of Jesus that is in the process of being "theologized" and becoming a symbolic story for the early believing communities.

"Fishing" is interpreted as another kind of drawing, catching, and harvesting, of people, followers, disciples, or members of a movement, in the language of mission. One kind of employment, fishing, will be transfigured into another, sharing the "good news," and offer another kind of provision. Simon and Andrew respond in an instant without further conversation. They leave their nets, the sign of their former profession. Likewise, James and John, leave their father and the hired men, their fishing colleagues, to follow the preacher.

The words of the text do not describe the tone of Jesus' words to the fishermen. It might be imagined as an authoritative command, a gentle invitation, or a prophetic call. Without question or delay the fishers obey. The gospel of Mark will demonstrate the work of exorcising, healing, feeding in which these disciples will join and will illustrate the deadly opposition to that ministry.

There will be many times after this day when their questions and doubts and failure to understand will be at the forefront of the gospel's attention. When they answer Jesus by getting up and following, they join a movement that has been advanced by the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptizer, Elijah, Elisha, and Moses. They join a mission that has been renewed by the faithful in each generation, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his many colleagues in the movement for civil rights in the United States.

That all the protagonists in this story are male: Jesus, brothers, father, and hired men presents an interpretive challenge for those who preach in a congregation in which women are among the hearers and receivers of this word. The call of male disciples justified the exclusion of women from leadership in the church in many Christian bodies. The depictions of this story in art and its many, many retellings in the tradition celebrate the two sets of brothers as the classic portraits of Christian disciples. The well-known phrase “fishers of men” obscures the reality of women among the community sought by the Jesus movement. Women and others, who long to “hear themselves,” in such a paradigmatic story of discipleship, will exercise their own hermeneutical translation of these stories, but sometimes our effort does not overcome the alienating effects.

Please, preachers! “Update” and “expand” the preaching/proclamation of this story with all the deep clues and rich material in Mark’s gospel:

“There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him (“served” *diakonein*) when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.” Mark 15:40-41

Some of these women may be hidden in the stories of women who demonstrate faith in Galilee and Tyre and Sidon: the woman in the crowd (Mark 5:34), the Syrophenecian mother (Mark 7:24-34), and the anointing one (Mark 14:3-9). There are likely those that the gospel does not tell, but that a preacher could. Like Bartimaeus who is called, rises, is healed, and follows (Mark 10:46-52), so too those who have been made well, will become disciples.

They will misunderstand and question and doubt. They will be opposed by violent power. They will suffer and lose their lives and those they love. These daughters, mothers, and sisters, whose following took them to the threshold of the tomb on Easter morning, can exemplify human “faith in the good news” as brilliantly as Simon, Andrew, James, and John.

[Cynthia Briggs Kittredge](#) | [0 Comments](#)

onah, the book, is a great story with fantastical imagery, from a great fish swallowing Jonah to cattle in sackcloth.

It's a story told around campfires to make a point. Or recited in Sunday School to finalize a moral. The word "great" signals that this story may be a folktale or satire, built around an obscure prophet who prophesied during Jeroboam's reign (1 Kings 14:23) as the people faced the Assyrian invasion (722 BCE). The book appears to be an effort to explain God's inscrutable mercy toward Assyria, where Nineveh was capitol. In the book of Jonah, the protagonist is not called a prophet, but rather a "Hebrew," referring to the pre-monarchic times of the nation-state.

Jonah is mentioned in the apocryphal books, first in 3 Maccabees 6:8-9, when the priest Eleazer prays using a litany of people God has delivered in distress before: "And Jonah, wasting away in the belly of a huge, sea-born monster, you, Father, watched over and restored unharmed to all his family. And now, you who hate insolence, all-merciful and protector of all, reveal yourself quickly to those of the nation of Israel -- who are being outrageously treated by the abominable and lawless Gentiles." The writer of 2 Esdras 1:39 lists Jonah among the patriarchal ancients and prophets after whom books are named. This story also lived on in Christian times, referred to by Jesus in Matthew 12:38-41 (see also Luke 11:29-30).

As a book, Jonah is a commentary on the ancient Israelite creed about God's mercy found first in Exodus 34:6-7:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,
"The LORD, the LORD,?
a God merciful and gracious,?
slow to anger,?
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,?
yet by no means clearing the guilty,?
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children?
and the children's children,?
to the third and the fourth generation."

The creed represents God's self-understanding and the people repeated time and again, in Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:17, 103:8, and 145:8, and the prophets Joel 2:14-3, Micah 7:18-19, and Nahum 1:2-3. It's quoted in the Apocrypha, Sirach 5:4. But, the book of Jonah wants to know, just how wide is God's mercy? And, what gets the guilty off the hook? Placed in the canon before Micah and Nahum, Jonah's version focuses on the mercy, while Micah seems to limit the mercy to the people of Israel (Micah

7:18-20), wondering “who is like our God,” and proclaiming God’s “unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.”

Nahum, following canonically on the heels of Micah and celebrating the downfall of Assyria, pretty much delights in them “getting what they deserve,” by focusing, not on the mercy of God, but on God’s jealousy for God’s people, Israel, and the fact that God will not clear the guilty: “A jealous and avenging God is the LORD, the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger but great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.”

Thus, our story of Jonah’s running from God and having to hear God say “a second time” go to Nineveh appears in this theological construct. Why wouldn’t he run in the opposite direction? Assyria, represented here by its capitol city, has been a thorn in Israel’s side, ransacking the northern kingdom and overthrowing it, followed soon by the complete devastation by Babylon who overtook Assyria. There is no reason to go to the “great city” to announce a “great” opportunity to repent. As their nearest enemy, their invasion ended Israel’s existence as a nation-state (1 Kings 17).

This background may help the preacher situate the story in its pathos. It’s a comic relief of a sorrowful tale. It’s an answer to a theodicy question. It’s the call to speak on behalf of all people, and to see even Ninevites as “chosen” if they repent. Who know; perhaps God will spare us if you call upon God’s name, the sailors declare (Jonah 1:6). Who knows, the king of Assyria asks. God may relent and change God’s mind (3:9; see also Micah 7:18-19). And that is the theological conundrum.

Who wants God to change God’s mind, especially when it means not destroying those whom we despise? Jonah becomes angry after preaching because he says, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and great to relent from punishing?” (Jonah 4:2). And Jonah sees God changing God’s mind as “greatly” displeasing. But changing God’s mind when people or nations repent also is a part of the divine character (see Jeremiah 18:7-8). But, Assyria, too, God?

And it also is why God has to call Jonah “a second time.” Because when he ran, he did not want to see Nineveh repent. He didn’t want that abounding grace to extend beyond his people, even though he KNEW, he just KNEW, it would. Jonah’s conversation with God in chapter 4 reads like a lament psalm, like “why do the wicked prosper.” And the people do repent. It’s a comical site: Jonah emerges from “a great fish” with seaweed wrapped around his head, and cries, “repent!” They have 40 days to do it, but the story is that they don’t hesitate like Jonah did. They respond immediately. The people of Nineveh are like the sailors who are not Hebrews; as soon as they know, they too repent (Jonah 2). That third chapter opening tells us pretty much all we need to know about human behavior in relation to other people and God as we understand God.

There are so many juicy parts to this “great” story. There is the drama of “who knows” what God will do. God is a radically free agent unbound by human theological expectations, and by the way, God revealed that about Godself a long time ago. And there are the religiously astute non-Hebrews. We get to see people who don’t have Jonah’s religious “training” or ability to “hear” from God, and yet, they respond with prayers and repentance. True, we have to be careful about blaming natural phenomena on God, but God IS responsible in Jonah’s tale. God is behind the “great storm.” In fact, Nahum says God’s ways are in the whirlwind and the storm (Nahum 1:3).

We learn, too, that repentance is not just an Israelite thing. And this reality has a couple of ramifications for us in our time. The first is that we do not know how God has already been among a people. Missionaries have used this text before, and I have noted in another place that they have used it often as a battering ram against non-Christian cultures.¹ But this text suggests that God moves on people’s heart at the sound of truth. They fast and pray of their own initiative, because “the people of Nineveh believed God” (Jonah 3:5). They do not need Jonah to tell them how to meet God.

It is quite possible that when we speak in other contexts, we are called to share with people who know God, and not to “convert” them. God has good reason for changing and accepting their repentance, after all. God’s final question in the book of Jonah is the one that hung in the midst of the story all along: “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” (Jonah 4:11). Well, what do you say to that?

Notes:

1. Valerie Bridgeman, “Jonah,” *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, Hugh Page, gen. ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

[Valerie Bridgeman](#) | [0 Comments](#)

Commentary on Psalm 62:5-12

[Shauna Hannan](#) | [0 Comments](#)



This Psalm is for the asylum seeker, those who seek refuge from adversaries, those who yearn for security and stability.¹

Dare I say that this Psalm is for us all especially now?

The Psalmist's experience of crisis prompts the big question of whether or not he (anyone?) can trust and take refuge in God in the face of enemies? The Psalmist's undeniable answer is, "Yes!" Especially at such a time, the only thing that offers true refuge is God, the steadfast one.

There are multiple genres at work in this Psalm, which suggests the Psalmist does all it takes to declare his trust in God and instruct others to do the same. In Psalm 62 one finds lament, praise, thanksgiving, wisdom, exhortation. Most interesting is variation in parts of speech utilized by the Psalmist as he moves from testimony to exhortation to prayer. The second half of the Psalm (the lectionary selection) progresses like this:

Speaking about God (3rd person testimony)

Direct address to the people (2nd person exhortation)

Speaking about people in light of who God is (3rd person instruction)

Direct address to the people (2nd person exhortation)

Speaking about God (3rd person testimony)

Direct address to God (2nd person prayer)

Working our way through the form itself offers a possible effective form for a sermon.

There are a few intriguing elements in the Psalmist's testimony in verses 5-7.

1. The English translation covers up the emphatic and repetitive 'ak that begins each of these verses. 'Ak is translated as alone or only ("but a" in verse 9).

"**Only** for God do I wait in silence. **Only** God is my rock and my salvation." This important word occurs 7 times in the whole Psalm.

2. Verses 5 and 6 are an exact repetition of verses 1 and 2 with only one exception; "Salvation" in verse 1 becomes "hope" in verse 5.

3. The sequence of possessive nouns is powerful: my rock, my salvation, my fortress, my mighty rock, my refuge. The determined Psalmist claims God as his own and seems to create a verbal fortress with this series.

After this opening expression of trust, the Psalmist turns to others with unapologetic exhortation (verse 8). Clearly, the *my* does not give the Psalmist exclusive rights to this refuge. God can be your only as well. Trust in him! Lament ("pour out your heart") before him. One of the most powerful turns is in verse 8b when the individual self-possession of God is transformed into a communal "God is a refuge for us!" The Psalmist's experience of crisis turns into faithfulness in the only refuge, God, which then turns into exhortatory proclamation that others might trust only in this one, God.

Knowing that crises might lead some to depend on unfaithful means of hope and salvation (is he is speaking here from personal experience?), the Psalmist names those things that challenge the 'ak; e.g., status in the world (interestingly, both high or low estates get in the way), extortion, robbery, riches.

Note elements of the wisdom tradition in verses 9 and 11. *Hebel* (translated as "breath") appears twice in verse 9 and reminds us of Qoheleth's wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:2, etc. where *hebel* is translated as "vanity"). The numeric parallelism in verse 11, "Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this," is akin to wisdom literature found in Proverbs (e.g., Proverbs 30:15-19).

So far, the Psalmist has gone from a personal expression of trust in God, to exhortation and instruction for the people to trust in God, before finally turning directly to God in prayer. It is the prayerer's affirmation of God's *hesed* that solidly undergirds all that has come before; one could not exclaim God as one's own

without God's *hesed*; one could not confirm God as rock or fortress or refuge without God's *hesed*; one could not proclaim that God is the only refuge without God's *hesed*; one could not exhort others to give up their delusional and vain dependencies without God's *hesed*; one could not advocate reliance on God alone as refuge and hope and salvation without God's *hesed*. It is the final prayer of praise and thanksgiving for *hesed* that gives this Psalmist both confidence and a restful soul.

Homiletical possibilities

Center of gravity

Draw out one or all of these Psalm's center of gravity possibilities. The first is the repeated verses 5-6 that serve as a refrain. The second is the outward turn from the Psalmist's own claim that God is his refuge and hope, to the affirmation that God is our refuge and hope as well. The third is the emphasis on God's steadfast love, *hesed*, that supports everything in the Psalm. Which of these, or which combination of these, might drive your sermon?

Mirror the form

Would you consider opening the sermon with your own expression of trust in God that has arisen out of an experience of crises? Then, what instruction or wisdom, based on your experience, might you offer the congregation? Name those delusional and vain dependencies that we all rely on. While most do not resort to explicit extortion or robbery, we might certainly be apt to set our hearts on riches and/or status. For our own good, exhort us not to put our trust or find refuge in these things, but in God alone. And then lead us in prayer of praise and thanksgiving to the steadfast one.

Scripture interprets Scripture

While Jesus' words in Mark are not to be read into this Psalm, Jesus himself is like the Psalmist when he proclaims, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Calling others to repent is emboldened by God's steadfastness. It is that steadfast love that is both good news and sign of the kingdom coming near. How powerful it is that Mark's account of the gospel begins at this point of trust in God's steadfastness.

Whatever the preacher does with a sermon based on this Psalm, the bottom line is that it is in God alone that we place our trust and take refuge in times of crisis.

Notes

1 Commentary first published on this site on [Jan. 25, 2015](#).

[Shauna Hannan](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Although 21st-century Christians live as though they have a key to life, 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31 has a cautious suggestion.

The hope of Christian life whether single or married is not anchored in the present but Paul reminds Christians in Corinth that life is short-lived -- that is, temporal and evaporating. In some way, this passage is a clarion call to Christians to be mindful of the *parousia* or the second coming of Jesus to which all hope is fixed. The Gospel message of these two verses have their foundations in the eschatological message Paul has in 1 Corinthians 6-7, whose summary culminates in these words, "I mean brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none..." (1 Corinthians 7:29).

The second coming of Jesus gives poignancy to the message of this passage. A careful spiritual, theological, and faith formation is called for, especially among Christians who are constantly focused on sexual gratification whether married or single. The central message Paul has in this passage is that the call of God on people's lives should be the governing axiom. All peoples, nations, male and female are called to a life of service and that should be the main focus of our life in these borrowed times.

While many Christians choose to settle and find comfortable locations in life, Paul's wisdom in the entire passage invites us to discern two crucial insights. First Corinthian Christians, and consequently us in the 21st century are called to anchor our hope and trust in God whose assurance of salvation was manifested in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In some poignant words, human beings are not authors of their salvation nor does their married status have an ounce of salvation but we depend on the mercy and justice of God -- whose mission is to rescue all humanity.

Whether, married or single, the second theological insight is that our Christian identities are not determined by society or marriage affiliations but that our true identities are firmly grounded in Jesus Christ. Thus, grace beckons us to live graciously in the midst of cultural pressures to marry and in the storms of our changing hormones. It is crucial for readers to see how Paul has a balanced view of our divine giftedness and how we should celebrate the diversity of gifts in the body of Christ as we await the second coming of Jesus. If these are divine gifts, the implications

are that, Christians are called to gracefully use these gifts not for self-gratification but rather in service to God (1 Corinthians 7:7).

The theological and economical language of Paul, especially in verses 1 Corinthians 7:29a are noteworthy. First, the apocalyptic sense of the message is clear in that Paul invites Christians to live with a sense of heightened expectation of the coming of Jesus. Thus, one's way of life must be shaped and informed by an ever-present awareness of the coming of Jesus, and possibly the end of life here on earth.

Second, Christians are called to a life of spiritual investment instead of financial investment. Discipleship is a life of investing time, resources, talents, and energy in the building of God's Kingdom, of which our final retirement homes are not earthly structures but heavenly ones. While marriage is a blessing, those in it must always be aware that there is another alternative worldview (1 Corinthians 13:10) and they are called to live a life of significance and purpose in ways that opens them to be ministered by others as well. Whether married or single, Christian life boils down to one thing -- ministry. Human longing or yearning for eternal life is not found in marriage context or social structures, but it is firmly found in our walk with Jesus Christ.

The passage asks us to imagine our context in relation to our faith in Jesus Christ. Eschatologically, we are challenged not to detach ourselves from the things of this world but to find a healthy balance that continues to energize us in our discipleship. Thus, marriage and being single have a place in God's ministry. Paul has all these practices in perspective because he sees them through the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

However, Paul's favorable perspective is clear -- the proclamation of the gospel of which he thought celibacy is the best practice because one is freed to focus full attention on evangelizing God's word.

When all is said and done, Paul's teaching in this passage is to invite the Church to constantly rethink theologically about issues of sex, marriage, and divorce as they are the most divisive topics in both ancient and postmodern Church.

[Israel Kamudzandu](#) | [0 Comments](#)

NOTES AND THOUGHTS

The absence of women (not counting women and children). E Johnson and the notion of fatherhood sneaking into the conversation.

The readiness for mission. Mark and immediately. The problem of letting go. Years ago a man died who was our neighbor across the street in Glenview Illinois. He threw nothing away and had a large garage and shop filled with stuff. In response, his family upon his death, pulled up a large dumpster in front of the house and threw everything away. Everything went into the dumpster. It appears that many of us have problems with this sort of thing. We can hang on to everything and let it fill up all available spaces. We can hang on to nothing and wind up with a sterile environ free from memory and from the past. Or... we can critically discern what to keep and what to throw—a much more time-consuming and energy-consuming position.

Churches are in the same position as my neighbor across the street.

Topic for discussion is what can we do together? This calls for thinking that is free from clinging and hanging on to the past. Disciples did not. Jesus did not. We should not.

What can we do together calls for discernment. It asks us to consider what to keep of our respective traditions and what to throw. It asks us to try some new things out and to keep some of the old. But it also asks us to ask why?

If we keep or we throw out programs, habits, hymns, practices and so on we had better know why? If we keep because we have a warm feeling that should not stand as a reason to truly keep and appreciate of the past. The deciding point should have something to do with feeding and nurturing and growing and encourage. We should ask: Does this feed spiritual growth? Formation? Small group sharing? Worship? Mission and Outreach? A sense of hospitality?

Churches grow because people inside of them have spiritual energy – energy that feeds a sense of community. As our two churches foster a relationship and try to discern what God is asking us to be and to do together, we need that spiritual energy, an energy of faith and optimism and forward thinking.

We do not need a sense of boundaries. A sense of fear. A sense of stereotyping one another, pushing whole congregations into places where we make protective assumptions that devalue one another instead of calmly exploring the reality of the other person.

And we have done well in terms of slowly getting to know one another. But there are more opportunities. I see opportunities in terms of several areas and you will raise, I hope, many other opportunities for developing our common sense of mission and of community.

Worship

Small group ministry

Music

The sharing of a mutual vision

The sharing of mission

Sharing among our leadership

Years ago, when Marilee and I and our small children were living in Glenview Illinois our neighbor across the street passed away. He died suddenly, apparently from a heart attack. Shortly thereafter the family gathered and at the same time a large dumpster arrived.

Our neighbor was a plumber and I remember that the combined garage-shop building close to the house was large. His wife and the children did not waste any time. Parading in and out of both house and especially the shop they proceed to throw into the dumpster a variety of objects. They threw furniture, tools, and plumbing supplies. Into the dumpster they went. Everything. Clothes, boots, coveralls. They threw everything away; every reminder went into the dumpster.

I wonder: Is that what happened when the disciples stopped mending the nets; when the disciples got out of their boats in response to Jesus presence and invitation?

It appears that many of us, perhaps all of us, have problems with this sort of thing. Faced with transitions, people find it tempting to hang on to everything, every crumb of memory. Or they find it tempting to be rid of the whole lot of possessions and memories. I have a bunch of 35mm slides that my father took of every trip our family took when I was a kid, and I would feel pretty freed up if I were to let go of the whole lot. Yet there are memories buried in there, images that I know I want to keep. And so the whole process slows down as I wander through the photographed past of my family's history.

To keep or to throw or to sort. If we hang on to everything, our present is filled up and overwhelmed with stuff. If we hang on to nothing, our environment can become strangely sterile, as if the past does not matter and speak to our present. Or we can strike a balance: we can critically discern what to keep and what to throw—a much more time and energy-consuming process.

Churches are in the same position as my neighbor across the street. Each year we are exposed to change and the dynamics of change. It may not be dramatic but it is there. The change we face never asks us to throw everything out. And it does not ask us to mindlessly hang on to every fragment of the past. Rather the change and changes that we face place us in a position in which we have to evaluate, sort, decide.

As individual churches of Trinity Platteville and Mineral Point, if we keep or we throw out programs, habits, hymns, practices and so on we had better know why? If

we keep programs, hymns, habits and practices we had better know why. The deciding point should have something to do with spiritual life; with mission; with feeding and nurturing and growing and encouraging one another in our common life of faith. When we look at things, we should ask: Does this feed spiritual growth? Christian formation? Small group sharing? Worship? Mission and Outreach? A sense of hospitality?

Churches grow because people inside of them have spiritual energy – energy that feeds a sense of community. As our two churches foster a relationship and try to discern what God is asking us to be and to do together, we need that spiritual energy, an energy of faith and optimism and forward thinking.

We do not need a sense of boundaries. A sense of fear. A sense of stereotyping one another, pushing whole congregations into places where we make protective assumptions that devalue one another instead of calmly exploring the reality of the other person.

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