

In his poem *Little Gidding* T. S. Eliot wrote,

"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."

That's where Mark is leading us—back to where we started, so that we may recognize it for the first time. I won't drag you through every single reference he makes to the prophets in today's reading, but trust me, Mark wants us to know that we are circling back to past events that are in fact eternal, timeless. John the Baptist himself resembles the prophet Elijah, and baptism, an initiation ritual already in use in Judaism, is both an end of an old life and a beginning of new life, as well as a pivot point when an individual turns—repents—and orients themselves toward God. The opening words, "the beginning of the good news," echoes the first words of Genesis, and the end of the book of Mark sends us to the opening scene, because at the end the angel at the tomb tells the women, "He is gone ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Mark is also distinctive from the other gospels for his emphasis on the ignorance of those around Jesus. Nobody understands Jesus, nobody recognizes what he is. In this baptism scene, God speaks only to Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Nobody else hears that affirmation in Mark's gospel, though they do in Matthew, Luke and John. And then finally, Mark is also distinctive for the sense of urgency in the text. Everything happens "immediately." Literally as soon as he is baptized, the Spirit "immediately" drives him out into the wilderness. We get no details about the 40 days in the wilderness (ahem, another allusion to earlier scripture), but hear next that "after John was arrested" (what? How did that happen? Who did that? What for? Too bad, Mark doesn't have time to spell everything out

for us.) “After John was arrested,” Jesus came to Galilee saying, “the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” In short order he calls Simon and Andrew away from their fishing boat, and then a little farther along, James and John. There is no motivation given for any of this, no context, just rapid, dramatic action without time for reflection.

I’ve been stumbling across stories about people making dramatic endings, sometimes knowing what’s next, other times not. A couple weeks ago *Christianity Today* published an editorial exhorting evangelicals to withdraw their support for Donald Trump, warning that the witness they are providing to Jesus Christ has been badly damaged. As one might predict, this was answered with counterpunch declarations that *Christianity Today* is a far-left publication that’s doing badly, charges reminiscent of those made against Pope Francis by right-wing Catholics. But what was more surprising was the resignation, within just a few days, of an editor of another publication, *The Christian Post*. Napp Nazworth quit when he learned that his magazine intended to remain supportive of Trump. He said, “I warned them. If you go down this road and join team Trump, then **that will destroy the reputation of The Christian Post**. We had reached the impasse and I really had no other choice but to leave.” The common theme with these two journals is damage to credibility or integrity. Or mission.

Tom and I are also hosting two campaign workers, one for Bernie and one for Warren. The Warren worker walked away from a good job in marketing and strategic communications to work for Elizabeth Warren. He said that he could not stay enthusiastic about work that was so solipsistic; it did not make any meaningful improvements to the world, and he couldn’t spend his life on something so empty.

In light of those contemporary stories, consider the rapid response that Jesus gets from

Simon and Andrew, James and John. Simon and Andrew “immediately . . . left their nets and followed him.” James and John “left their father Zebedee in the boat *with the hired men*, and followed him.” Jesus’ sort of bizarre formulation, “I will make you fish for people,” suggests that he’s inviting them to apply a skill set they already have to a job that is more important. In the case of James and John, their leaving is especially dramatic because they’re abandoning their father. And it’s interesting, though I’m not sure what to do with it, that they were able to hire assistants for the fishing boat—maybe Mark is telling us that not all Jesus’ disciples were the poorest of the poor.

Anyway, we’re seeing some young fishermen walk away from their boats pretty darn fast. They don’t ask for time to think it over; they don’t seem to discuss it with each other. It’s as if they’d been waiting for this opportunity to fulfil some unrecognized potential lying within. I know a couple things about the fishing industry in Galilee in the first century, and one thing I know is that it was a cash cow for the Roman Empire, which made buckets of money from licensing fees and taxes. The boys were essentially supporting themselves by making money for the Empire. Maybe it felt like our Warren worker’s strategic communications job, which paid the bills but didn’t make the world a better place and required all his time and energy to do it. I was raised to think that the disciples renounced the good things in life when they responded to Jesus’ call, but today I’m thinking that he offered them a new lease on life: Repent and believe the good news—there’s important work to be done and you’re the people to do it. They pivoted from fishing for fish to fishing for people because one sign of the nearness of the kingdom is that you get to do work that feeds your soul.

“In my end is my beginning,” Eliot wrote. The abrupt ends of careers are the beginnings

of something else. In the case of the Galilean fishermen, it was not necessarily a conventional success story. After all, the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist, had been executed and now Jesus steps into his place. Jesus plucks the boys from an occupation that supports the Roman Empire and puts them in one that undermines its legitimacy. It doesn't take a genius to see that this could be career suicide as well as literal suicide. But it's strangely too good an offer to pass up.

Parker Palmer wrote recently that early in his life he'd been fired, and it had crushed him for months. Eventually he was able to look back and see how that experience had prepared him for his real life's work. He wrote,

Why look back with regret when I can look at all of my mess-ups as humus, compost for the growing I needed to do. I love the fact that the word "humus" is related to "humility." The good I do today may well have its roots in something not-so-good I did in the past. Knowing that takes me beyond both the sinkhole of regret and the ego-inflation of pride.

The end of his job was the beginning of what he really needed to do. And then Palmer points us to a poem by David Ray, *about* something Robert Frost had said, if you can follow that:

Do you have hope for the future?  
someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.  
Yes, and even for the past, he replied,  
*that it will turn out to have been all right*  
*for what it was*, something we can accept,  
mistakes made by the selves we had to be,  
not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,  
or what looking back half the time it seems  
we could so easily have been, or ought . . .  
The future, yes, and even for the past,  
that it will become something we can bear.  
And I too, and my children, so I hope,  
will recall as not too heavy the tug  
of those albatrosses I sadly placed

upon their tender necks. *Hope for the past*,  
yes, old Frost, your words provide that courage,  
and it brings strange peace that itself passes  
into past, easier to bear because  
you said it, rather casually, as snow  
went on falling in Vermont years ago.

This is the time of year when we're particularly conscious of endings and beginnings.

The story that Mark tells us is epic and world-shaking, and I do not mean to whittle it down to some kind of optimistic personal self-help advice. But I do think that *metanoia*, pivoting, repenting, takes place in the world only as we ourselves are able to practice it personally. We be the change we want to see in the world, as it were. I'm thinking that as things end and die, Jesus invites us to life-giving beginnings. Fishing paid the bills, but it didn't change the world or nourish men's souls. In our ends are our beginnings, and even the mistakes and offenses of the past may, with God's grace, provide humus for the growth of the kingdom.

Let us pray:

Redeeming God, what we have wasted, turn into fertilizer. What lies dormant within us, awaken and show us where to use it. Help us to think but not overthink, feel without being paralyzed, stay open to your call to respond to the nearness of your kingdom. Amen.