

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Background

So this morning, we're going to need to fasten our safety belts and put on our crash helmets because we're going on a high-octane spiritual roller coaster ride of dips and drops, turns and curves.

Now if you're afraid of height or speed—have no fear, because Mark has some really, really good news that's straight from God. God is not only **WITH US**, God is **FOR US**, and God is **ON THE MOVE**. God is here RIGHT NOW to help us do what we could never do for ourselves. We're not alone.

Another important theme is the “**kingdom of God**.” It's **THE MAIN THEME** of Jesus' teachings. Jesus never clearly spells it out with bullet points. Instead he uses parables to describe what the kingdom is like. First, the kingdom of God originates in God alone. Humans can't manufacture it. Rather, God prepares the kingdom FOR US, God gives and bequeaths the kingdom TO US and to those who long for it. Seek ye first the... kingdom of God.

By God's grace, we can inherit the kingdom, accept the kingdom, and enter the kingdom. It transcends time and space. God's “reign drops” are refreshing, bringing mercy, peace, justice, and freedom wherever it lands.

The kingdom starts small like a mustard seed and it grows into something large. It is present and future. It's here in our midst, but not in all its fullness. In the Lord's Prayer we pray “thy kingdom come. Where God's reign, or authority is at work, beautiful things happen:

- the sick are tended to and healed,
- the hungry fed,
- the thirsty given drink,
- strangers extended hospitality,
- the forgotten remembered,
- the ignored seen,
- prisoners are visited and released,
- and the debt of debtors is cancelled.

Those who have repented and turned to God are forgiven and set free. Instead of recrimination and retribution, restoration and reconciliation abound. The kingdom of God is a little bit of heaven on earth.

God's kingdom turns the world's way of doing things upside down and inside out. And, as Christmas just reminded us, King Jesus has arrived—and his kingdom arrives with the King. His “kingdom come” is good news and “glad tidings” of “comfort and joy” and “peace on earth!”

*So let's now hear God's word to us in...*

### **Gospel Reading: 1:14-20 (NRSVue)**

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God <sup>15</sup> and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

<sup>16</sup> As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus said to them, “Follow

me, and I will make you fishers of people.”<sup>18</sup> And immediately they left their nets and followed him.<sup>19</sup> As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.<sup>20</sup> Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – “No Safety Nets”



**Stop, drop, and roll.** Do you know where that saying comes from? What it's about? It was Memorial Day weekend in 1970 and the Ruch family were having a little backyard BBQ celebration with some of their friends. Ernie, the dad, went to light the grill, and his three kids followed right behind him. Suddenly, a fireball burst out of the grill, knocking over the dad and the three kids. The youngest, David, caught on fire. The oldest brother Ethan, who was ten at the time, immediately acted. He picked up his little brother, threw him in the dirt, and started rolling him over until the flames were smothered.

Thus, **STOP, DROP, and ROLL** was born.

The STOP, DROP, and ROLL method eventually became a fire awareness campaign with Dick Van Dyke, and pretty much everybody knows it now. It's what you do when you catch on fire: STOP, DROP, and ROLL. That made me think: *how should we respond to Jesus today?*

John the Baptist said of Jesus, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Jesus' call has a way of knocking the wind out of us and setting our souls on fire. So what's a "sure fire" way to respond appropriately to Christ's call in our lives today? STOP, DROP, and STROLL. When Christ calls, we STOP in our tracks and LISTEN. We DROP our nets. We drop EVERYTHING. And we STROLL to Jesus and with Jesus. We follow WHEREVER and WHENEVER Jesus leads us to go.

Our passage begins this way: "Now after John was arrested." This can also be translated, "Now after John was delivered up" or "after John was handed over." Mark is telling us that God is at work here, even in the difficult things like John the Baptist's imprisonment. This same phrase will be used of Jesus at his passion and crucifixion, that he was "handed over" or "delivered up" to Pilate. God was at work in Christ's suffering. In fact, in the book of Acts, followers of Jesus are

"handed over" or "delivered up" for being identified with Christ. God is still working and guiding us, not only in the good times, but especially in the bad.

With John exiting stage left, now was the time for Christ to take center stage. He kicks off his ministry preaching with a shorter sermon than I will preach this morning. Nineteen words long in fact:

"The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news!"

Now's the time—REPENT! BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS!

TURN and LEARN. Not TURN or BURN but TURN and LEARN. Change your mind and believe. Be-live the gospel. Take Jesus at his word. TURN AROUND and TRUST the good news. Follow wherever Jesus leads.

Jesus' words are direct and to the point, kind of like what Ben Stiller says playing the character Starsky in the movie "Starsky and Hutch"—"DO IT."

Trust and obey, for there's NO OTHER WAY.



So Jesus began his "beach ministry" along the Sea of Galilee. There "he saw" two siblings selling sea bass on the seashore. Sounds almost like a tongue twister, doesn't it? One brother was named Simon, who would be later be renamed Peter. The nickname Peter means basically "Rocky" or "The Rock." And there was also his brother Andrew, who Jesus affectionately called "Andy." The two fished for a living and they were casting their net into the lake—until they heard "the voice." "Hey Simon and Andrew, come follow me," says Jesus, "and

I'll make you into a new kind of fisherman. Instead of catching sea bass, you're going to catch people with me."

Jesus spoke Simon and Andrew's language. He knew their world and their hearts. He knew Simon and Andrew were from the fishing village of Bethsaida, which means "House of Fish." The fish was also very symbolic to the Jewish people. Fish symbolized the people of Israel. The *ichthus*, the Greek word for fish, was also an ancient secret symbol identifying Christians.

The ancient rabbis had a saying, "The people who have a thirst for the Torah will be as little fishes." The fish is a creature of the water. Fish can't live without water. A follower without the Torah, the Scriptures, without the Torah made flesh, Jesus, is like a fish out of water. Jesus would transform and train these regular and ordinary guys, these "fishers of fish," into "fishers of men and women." We don't have to be high and mighty to be used mightily by God. Just ready and willing. To be called, we don't have to be able because Jesus is more than able to equip us.

No questions asked, the two brothers, IMMEDIATELY and WITHOUT DELAY, DROPPED EVERYTHING and followed Jesus to heaven knows where. STOP, DROP, and STROLL.

Notice Jesus didn't say follow MY TEACHINGS. Nor did he say, follow MY FORMULAS or THEORIES. He didn't say follow MY PHILOSOPHY or MY POLITICAL, THEOLOGICAL, or ETHICAL SYSTEMS. Follow ME... Come after me... Get to know me...

Jesus is taking the initiative and calling the shots here. And we follow his lead. What we've reached here is a *bona fide* turning point. The golden hour. THE decisive moment for action. When Christ is really calling, there's some urgency. A response is needed. It's time sensitive. Time is of the essence. It's a call to action. There's a divine task we're being summoned to do. Work to be done.

Jesus, Simon, and Andrew didn't stop there. They kept going on their beach stroll with Jesus. A few yards down the shore, "Jesus saw" two more brothers:



James and John in a boat, preparing their nets, along with their father Zebedee and the hired men.

"James and John, come, and follow me." No questions asked, right then and there, the second set of brothers IMMEDIATELY DROPPED EVERYTHING and followed Jesus and Simon and Andrew. James and John left behind the family business.

STOP, DROP, and STROLL.

The good news is Jesus is still seeing, still speaking, still strolling, and still calling out our names: Joe and Joy, Marilyn and Michael, Levi and Luna, Kathy and Keith: "FOLLOW ME!"

One final word of warning: Jesus' call can be abrupt, even jarring. It has a way of altering our grand designs, life plans, tidy systems, and sweeping assumptions. You see, Jesus carries with him the weight of authority. He's our Lord, our Master, our Teacher. So when he calls...we obey. "Sir, yes Sir!"

For sure, there are seasons for discernment and waiting on God. We need to prayerfully and carefully listen that it is indeed the Shepherd's voice calling. But when the time has arrived and God's green light is given, we go full steam ahead.

Like when God said to Abraham, "Leave your country and your father's house and go to the land I will show you." You go. Like when God said to Moses, "Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." You go. Like when the Lord said to Paul on the Road to Damascus: "Get up and enter the city and I will tell you what to do." You go.



And God is still calling and summoning, right here and now. To do this, we've got to let go of and leave behind our safety nets and security blankets, our training wheels and crutches, our creature comforts, and familiar routines and rituals. Drop them all.

# TRUST

Jesus is saying, don't trust in these things. Trust the good news. Trust in me—I'm doing a new thing. Follow me.

Unlearn the old. Learn anew the new. The life of faith is an exciting one, an incredible venture and voyage of faith. It's often mind-blowing, earth-shattering, and paradigm-shifting. It's really, really good news, but not necessarily easy news.

This is where the kingdom of God is. Where Jesus is. And wherever Jesus is, that's where we want to be.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Fish Magic" by Paul Klee, 1925

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