

As I read this morning's passage, I couldn't help but be reminded of two quotes we've become familiar with here at Sardis.

On the Sunday after Christmas, we often repeat Howard Thurman's famous poem: *The Work of Christmas*. Once we put away those Christmas decorations, we are reminded that the real work begins. It's time to start (not that we ever should have stopped!) finding the lost, and healing the broken, and feeding the hungry, and releasing the prisoner, and rebuilding the nations, and bringing peace among others, and making heart music!

And from time to time, we hear Walter Rauschenbusch tell us: "The kingdom of heaven is always but coming." That is to say, God's world or God's realm has, and is, and will always be present among us. And. And. And. God's world – our living into God's beautiful and mysterious potential – is always evolving or coming about.

The voices of Brother Howard and Brother Walter, tell us, that today, January the 24th, 2021, is THE time. God's realm is breaking into this world, and our decisiveness, intentionality, and willingness to use our God-given gifts in advancing love of God and neighbor add to the cornerstone of such a movement.

This past Christmas, we dared to believe in God's presence among us. Today, we actualize our hope in God's presence by joining in the work of the Christ.

I have a hunch that Thurman and Rauschenbusch leaned on Mark's gospel to glean their insight into discipleship. And I think they would invite us into Mark's gospel, and they'd tell us to turn to Chapter One, verses 14-20.

I know, I know, we live in a volatile world, a scary world, an anxious world: pandemic, and political polarization, and rampant poverty. And you want to know if an old story, and old quotes can help us makes sense of this messiness? Well guess what Sardis...they lived in messiness, too. Rauschenbusch navigated the systemic poverty unleashed on the Hell's Kitchen, NY area by the advent and maturation of the Industrial Revolution. Thurman experienced the atrocities of the Jim Crow era, and courageously articulated their theological implications in a time when people were significantly less receptive to hearing them. And Jesus

joins us in a time of great uncertainty, his people and land under Roman occupation, and on the precipice of annihilation.

So bring your anxiety and uncertainty into this chaos. God has made a habit, from the very beginning, in being present with us, despite the world's chaos, and God has made a habit of offering space, and order, and life to each one of us, in the midst of such chaos. So come along, with Jesus, and the earliest disciples, and the earliest storytellers, and with Brother Howard, and with Brother Walter, and with each other, and let's find a way to actualize our hope!

Here goes:

Mark's author tells us:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14-15, NRSV)

Jesus turns around, or comes back to the Galilee, a region where Herod exploits those associated with his fishing villages and hatcheries – that is to say, the people give Herod all their fish, and in return, he barely provides enough bread for them to live on. Jesus comes here with a message of hope. He's says it's time. God's so near you can reach out and touch Her. So repent – no not beat yourself up for all your perceived shortcomings or imperfections, or proclaim your unworthiness – but repent: change both your thinking and your countenance; turn your energy toward this very present God, and believe in the change that can happen among a beloved community. Believe that you, too, have transformative, God-given value and gifts.

This is Jesus' message. And it was impactful. Jesus manages to liberate his new friends from two common barriers to discipleship: 1) Jesus frees Andrew and Simon from the pursuit of material wealth and 2) Jesus frees James and John from a tetheredness to material responsibilities.

Let's start with Simon and Andrew:

Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:16-18, NRSV)

Haven't we all chased fish because we didn't realize it was people we were really after. Simon and Andrew are casting their nets for fish in order that they can subsist, but also in hopes of the big catch. This is the only way they know how to make sense of the world. I think Jesus gives them permission to believe in people, and to believe in God's empowerment of people more than believing in Caesar's systems.

Caesar's machinations seek to convince people to pursue objects or wealth, or to participate in rituals that provide status instead of collaborative relationships. Therefore value is defined by what one has or does, not by who one is. Jesus offers each person the opportunity to seek out relationships that will offer mutual value rooted in God's love.

These two men most likely labored twelve hours a day in the pursuit of a few sardines. Imagine all of that energy redirected, and poured into a connection with God, AND a desire and intentionality to love neighbors. How much better might our world be, friends, if we put the same energy into the building of relationships as we did into the pursuit of provisions in our existing systems?

And how about the liberation of James and John?

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

The older we get, the more responsibilities we take on. In many cases, our responsibilities extend to the care or support of family members. Simon and Andrew, at least from the details of the text, don't have to consider leaving behind their father in this new pursuit. Not so for the sons of Zebedee. Clearly, Jesus is able to offer a compelling witness to James and John, though the text isn't

specific about his exact words. But the illustration reveals that our dependence on worldly systems is not always just bound up in acquiring status or even scratching out subsistence. We can also be tethered to a need for security. What happens to those whom we love, or help support, when we abandon our worldly responsibilities in order to truly experience God's nearness? Too often our hesitation in disrupting worldly standards and systems supersedes our longing to usher in God's possibilities. Jesus reminds us that a dependence on God, a response to the urgency and importance of God's calling, ultimately offers an independence from the things that give us a false and fleeting sense of security. And such a response, ultimately, provides a much better sense of wellbeing, both for our immediate family, and our extended family of God.

There's a part of us that wants to chide James and John for leaving their father behind, though I would note he had hired help, too. But again, I want you to imagine the power of two more lives, wholly devoted to discipleship. Were these lives not two more cracks added to a system that wants some people to have all the fish, some people to work for those fish, and some people to have neither work, nor fish, nor even bread? Were these two lives one step closer to a world where sons not only provide for their fathers, but for every father, and mother, and son, and daughter, and neighbor, too?

Every Christmas, I am re-amazed by Luke's birth story. One tiny, precious, perfectly-human life reveals that God is present with us. But this morning, what I find even more amazing, and I wish it struck me like this every year, is that if one birth can reveal God's presence, I think that means one life, every life, my life, your life, our lives, can bring about God's world. Right now. Right now. Right now!!!

Thurman reminds us that the work of Christmas has begun. Jesus, in his invitation to the first disciples, and to you and me as well, clearly tells us that such work is made manifest in each us.

Sooo...the time is right. And we have the capacity, and the credentials, and the calling to do righteous work.

What then, does all of this mean for us in the middle of a pandemic, four days after an inauguration, in the midst of an economy that fails to serve our most vulnerable neighbors, and each one us, confined, mostly, to virtual space.

I do not believe the pandemic is evidence of the kingdom's distance, nor do I believe a vaccination is evidence of its culmination. Despite our grief, I think God is still present. And I think, if we are to rid ourselves of this plague, we're gonna have to trust in God's people, and advocate for every neighbor's value more than we fight to secure a return to the normalcy of our broken systems. We must restore our neighbors in order to restore our systems.

I do not believe that the inauguration of this president, nor any before him, is a reflection of the kingdom's progress. I see before us, just as I did four years ago, the opportunity for our community to be one of conscience over comfort. Like all presidents, we will both pray for, and hold him accountable. The work of Christmas is not expend our energy installing leaders with whom we agree; the work of Christmas is to call our leaders, regardless of their affiliations, to implementing policies that enhance the dignity and welfare of every neighbor.

We live in a city where upward mobility is a fleeting possibility; a quarter of our school children are food insufficient; Uptown is filled with tent villages. The work of Christmas does not call us to fill our nets with fish, in order that might avoid the same fate; the work of Christmas calls us to fish for our neighbors – to see their potential; to encourage their potential; to make for them a world where manna isn't just a story in Exodus, it is the story of our own Exodus from futile systems.

I can't tell you how many times I've said, "When we get back to the new normal, I'm gonna..." Yes, friends we live in a virtual world, and we are grieving the loss of so many familiar things. But I think, Jesus is telling us that now is as good a time as any to get a move on. I think the work of Christmas begins when people of faith choose to turn a pregnant pause – that's right we've been idling for nine months – into an age of transformation.

Sardis Baptist Church, the baby has been born. The star has settled over Jerusalem. The baby has grown up, been baptized, and is now ready to do all of

The Work Begins With Us
Bob Stillerman
Epiphany Three, 1-24-2021
Mark 1:14-20



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

the God-stuff. And here we sit...mending our nets, and tending our daddy's boat. But there's a whole world full of people out there. I think it's time we started fishin' for them. I think it's time we experienced our repentance – the redirection of our energy, attention, and countenance toward the future that can be right now: a community bound in love of God and neighbor.

May it be so, and may it begin right now. Amen.