First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

1/21/24

An Unbound God

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 fishers. **17**And Jesus said to them,

“Follow me and I will make you fishers of 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.

Preaching every week can be a bit tricky, if you want the truth. I absolutely love preaching; I love having the opportunity to deep dive into God’s word, as well as the challenge of presenting it to you. Still, it can be interesting, and somewhat frustrating at times. There’s the fact that Sunday comes around each and every single week, whether I want it to or not, and that means I’m always under a deadline to create a meaningful, scripture based sermon for you; one which I hope has you leaving with more questions than answers. In addition to the relentless return of Sunday, each week, there are times when I seriously wrestle with a particular text. Sometimes, there’s so many themes to choose from that it’s difficult to land on a particular topic. Other times, there’s very little to go on. And that’s where I found myself with the Mark text today.

As I’ve mentioned before, Mark was a pretty no-nonsense kind of guy. He painted with a very broad brush and assumed that his readers knew exactly what he was talking about, so he didn’t feel the need to provide much detail.

In the six short verses of this particular passage, we see Jesus proclaiming the Good News on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We all know what happens next, as this event is captured in all four of the Gospel narratives. Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him. And they all immediately leave everything; their livelihood, their communities, even, as is the case with James and John, their families. I’m not sure that if I had been in that situation, if I would have been as willing to take that kind of risk, to be honest. Yet, that’s what these four fishermen did.

Now, when I’m writing a sermon, I will often focus on a phrase or an idea articulated in the text; something to hang my hat on, so to speak. This week, what caught my attention was verse 15, where Jesus says, *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near…”* What made me stop and think, was the apparent conflict between the words “fulfilled,” and “near.” If we pause and think about it, for a minute, the combination of these two words in this context, simply does not make sense. How can something be both completed, as the word fulfilled implies and still not be completed, as the word near seems to tell us?

It can be a struggle to reconcile these two very different ideas. And struggle I did, this week. However, if we remember that God is in all, through all and around all, perhaps what Jesus, who we understand to be God incarnate, is saying here makes a bit more sense. What Jesus is saying is that it’s not an either-or proposition, but instead it’s a both-and situation. I’ll admit that looking at it this way, kind of blew my mind.

We humans think of time as a linear concept, don’t we? We have a totally understandable desire to put timelines on the events of our lives. We want everything to have a beginning, a middle and an end and we see time as a straight line; past present and future. I would argue that in doing so, we forget that God exists outside of space and time.

I’m sure that most of you, have heard the phrase, “God’s time, is not our time.” It’s a phrase that I’ve used quite often, myself. And it is often used to explain to ourselves, and to others, why God doesn’t seem to hear us, and it’s also used as a source of comfort when God doesn’t come through for us as soon, or as fast, as we would like. However, Isaac Watts, the author of the hymn, “O. God, Our Help in Ages Past,” captured the reality of the situation perfectly when he wrote, “A Thousand Ages in Thy Sight are Like an Evening Gone.” God’s time is indeed not our time.

So, where does all of this leave us? Our natural tendency to see time in a linear fashion, creates a situation where it becomes very easy to put God in a box. In our human desire to define the undefinable, to have a beginning, middle and an end to all of our experiences, we draw lines around the Divine; we limit who God is, not just for ourselves, but for those around us as well. In effect, we bind God. I’m absolutely convinced that the God we worship is so much bigger than any boundary we may put in place.

The most obvious example of putting God in a box, and limiting the presence of the Creator, shows up in the language we use to describe the Holy One. Father, Lord, He, Him, Master, and King, among others, are all words that have been used for centuries in an attempt to help us gain a small understanding of the true nature of God. Those words show up in many of the beloved hymns of our faith, and is most of the translations of our sacred text. And if those are the words that you use to understand and draw closer to God, that’s just fine.

However, for those of us who may have not had a good experience with our fathers, while we were growing up, using masculine langue to define and understand God, can, and often does, actually push some away from a closer relationship with the Holy One. That was certainly the case for me, and it took a very long time for me to see God as a God of love and not as the vengeful, angry God exemplified by my own father’s behaviors and actions.

Now some will say that using male pronouns to describe God, is the only appropriate way to talk about the Divine, because that’s the way the Bible speaks about God. That argument fails to take into account translation errors, as well as deliberate attempts to shape God’s word in a certain way to promote an agenda that was meant to keep men in power in the church and in the culture.

Of course, the exclusive use of male pronouns has been and, in some corners of Christendom, continues to be, used to deny women their rightful place within the leadership of the Church.

Let me also note that the exclusive use of feminine language to refer to God, which has become popular in some circles, leaves us with exactly the same problem of exclusion. If God exists outside of space and time, as I firmly believe, and if we take this argument to its logical conclusion, what that means is that God transcends gender. God is neither male or female and God cannot be constrained by our limited attempts to describe who and what God is. Again, I have no problem with others using specific pronouns to talk about God, as the ultimate goal is for each of us to draw closer to the Holy One. And if that includes using specific language to define who and what God is, that’s OK.

I would, however, challenge all of us to unbind God; to take God out of the box, to erase the lines and boundaries which we were taught exist around the nature of God, and expand our thinking to entertain the possibility that the Divine is more than what our limited human understanding can comprehend.

Language is only one-way we humans try to limit God, so, here’s a question for you. What other ways do we tend to limit or bind God? What other beliefs, practices and customs do we participate in that limit God’s ability to work through us in our lives and in the world around us?

What would happen if each and every one of us, reexamined those beliefs, practices and customs and expanded our understanding of who and what God is? Note that I’m using the word expanded, here, because I’m not asking anyone to change how they view God. What I’m encouraging all of us to do is build on the foundation of how we see God.

What if God were truly unbound in our own lives and in our world? Imagine what could be accomplished if we took God out of the box. What if we, like Simon, Andrew, James and John, were to answer the call to leave everything we knew about God behind and walk a different path?

Your charge, this week, is to unbind God, in your own life. Take a look at those beliefs, practices and customs which may be putting limits on how God is present in your life. Build on your foundational belief in God and expand who and what God is for you. In doing that, I believe we can bring about the Kin-dom of God, right here and right now.

AMEN