

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
January 7 & 8, 2012  
John Crosby  
Vision Series: Follow Jesus  
Mark 1:14-19**

Let me immediately wreck the schedule of the new year by adding something in. I was sitting there praying for the sermon and what hit me was that I was praying but I was really talking at God. I realized that I had been doing that all morning. You know how sometimes you just immediately engage with other people, but if you don't engage, you are just talking at them. You haven't said "How are you? Good morning." That has been me with God this morning. Maybe with some of you it is the same way, so I thought maybe before I talk, together we could just close our eyes and say, "Good morning" to the God who made us.

Good morning, again, Lord Jesus. We have been thinking of You maybe or talking at You, but good morning. Thank You so much for stopping us just for a second, stopping us to remind us that You love us. Remind us of that love throughout this hour, please, and let us keep an ear to what You might say to us. Amen.

I was at the gym, day before yesterday now, and I bumped into somebody from here. He is usually sitting right there, but there is a hole in the pew there so I can't embarrass him. He is doing better at getting to the gym than getting to church. He will be at the next service, I am sure. Anyway, I hadn't seen him at the gym before. I go up and say, "Hi." He goes, "Oh, yeah. New Year's resolution. This time it is going to happen." I wished him well, and the next day I'm not at the gym, and he probably is, and the next day he is not at church, and I probably am. It is hard to do these New Year's things, isn't it? We have the best intentions in the world, but all of last year's momentum goes against us.

How many of you made New Year's resolutions, anybody? Okay, okay. Let me put it another way. How many of you can think of one significant way that you would like to be in a different place twelve months from now, one significant way that you would like to be a better person twelve months from now? Raise your hands again. I'll try talking to the three of you who did not raise your hands. This is what I'd like to talk about this next month. Together we want to talk about how this community can help us become the people God wants us to be. We are going to go through our vision as a church and ask, "Are we helping with that, connecting to God and becoming the people God designs us to be, because change is so hard?" I thought it would help if we started over by starting over, to go back to the very foundation and say, "What is everything else building on? How do I know what I am supposed to become unless I have a picture from the beginning?"

I would ask you to take out the Bibles from the pews in front of you or yours if you brought it, and turn to Mark, chapter 1. Of the four stories of Jesus, the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke,

and John), the Gospel of Mark is probably the first one written down. The others build off of it. Matthew and Luke steal a lot of Mark word for word. Mark is the original story. Because of that, at the start of Mark, the very first words are about Jesus or from Jesus. So, if we want to see what the foundation for a new year is, let's look at Mark, chapter 1, beginning with where it says, "After John was put in prison...." This is one of the passages we studied in the 100 key passages a couple of years ago. If you are reading this, I have four words I would like you to underline just to make sure that you are getting something out of it. If the words are already underlined, circle them. This is where it starts.

<sup>14</sup> After John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" <sup>16</sup> As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." <sup>18</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup> When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. <sup>20</sup> Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

This is the very start of Jesus' public life. It gives us a hint of what we are supposed to be doing this next year, and it starts with a word I would like you to underline, time. Jesus says "The time has come...." Back then the sign that the time had come was the imprisonment of John the Baptist, his cousin. Now Jesus has His time. Back then it was a person going to prison. Now maybe it is just a new year. You have a new year to take advantage of. God speaks through situations, through events, just as much as He speaks through that still, small voice. Again and again, the time is now. It is an opportunity, but it is also urgent. Don't blow this. Now is the time.

The second word after "The time has come...." is "Repent...." Now we all think we know what *repent* means because we have all been in church before. For us, *repent* means, stop sinning, stop being a bad person, become a Christian, be a good person. That is probably not exactly what Jesus meant. When Jesus said *repent* (another word for turn) Jesus probably meant to turn away from the idea that the political agenda of driving the Romans out of Israel was what was going to save them. It is not going to save them. "Turn away from that," He said. "Turn away from your religion back to God. Turn back to God." Repent means turn around from what distracts you to what can save you. And that leads to believe, the third thing. I don't know if your translation says "believe in the good news" or just "believe," but what Jesus is talking about here is believe *in* something. Trust something. Jews trusted all kinds of things. They trusted their ancestry. They were proud of that. They trusted the land God gave them. They trusted the law or the temple. What do we trust? What do you believe in really? I think Minnesotans believe that if you are nice, good things will happen. Minnesota nice. I think Minnesotans trust in hard work, trust in church, trust in doing good things that balance the scale out.

All that may be true, but it is not what Jesus says we are supposed to believe in. He says we are supposed to believe in the good news. So that is the last thing you should underline in that section. We are supposed to believe in the good news. What is the good news? Well, for Jesus the good news is that the Kingdom of God is coming and the King is walking among you. Jesus is the King coming to His Kingdom. That is the good news, the coming of the King into the Kingdom. If somebody wants to know what Jesus' story is, that is His whole story right there. The time is at hand. The Kingdom of heaven is near. Repent. Believe in the good news. That is

the story of Jesus. That is why He came, and He says it over and over in different ways. That is what you are supposed to believe, but can I tell you this? Memorizing those four things will not make your year different. That is not what changes my friend's weight or your sense of hope for the coming year. It just makes you try harder, but trying harder doesn't necessarily help you become a better person.

Becoming a better person is about the last thing that I want you to be. Look at that passage again. When Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, He comes to two groups of people and says the same thing to them. He says, "Follow Me." Not believe in Me. Not accept Me. "Follow Me. The King is walking by. Follow Me to the Kingdom." This year I want to suggest that becoming the person you were always meant to be is about following Jesus into the Kingdom. We are going to spend a month, next month, looking at the things that are obstacles to following Jesus. Then we are going to spend all of Lent talking about ways that we can help you follow Jesus best because, trust me, I know. Fifty-nine years of will power has not worked. Will power will not work. We need to hear "Follow Me." The thing is, we hear Him say, "Follow Me," and we don't quite understand it the way the original Jews would have understood it. When He comes up as a rabbi, when Rabbi Jesus comes up and says to these fishermen, "Follow Me," they heard something very different from what you and I would have heard.

I am going to steal the rest of this from a guy named Rob Bell, who taught it to me. He learned it from a guy named Ray Vanderlon. To understand what *follow me* means, you need to learn about the life of first-century Jews. It is tied into their educational system. In their lives Jews went to three schools, three *bets*. The first *bet*, the first school that all the Jewish boys went to, was *Bet Safar*. Jesus would have gone to *Bet Safar*. It is elementary school, usually from ages 5 to 10, and it would be either in the synagogue or in the rabbi's house, and you would memorize the Torah there. That was the purpose of the first school. *Bet Safar* was where you memorized Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Ten-year-olds sometimes had memorized the whole first five books of the Bible. I can't even remember my Social Security Number, but they would have memorized those Books because it was something they did every day.

That set all the boys up for the second school when they were 10 years old. It was sexist back then. Now all the boys and all the girls go. They would go from *Bet Safar* to *Bet Talmud*. If *Bet Safar* is elementary school, *Bet Talmud* is trade school. You learn to take what you have learned and put it in your life and the way you do that is, you read the rest of the Bible. They memorized Psalms and the prophets, the history of the Old Testament, but they also learned to ask questions. Fared Zakaria just this morning on CNN was talking about education here and around in the rest of the world. In the West education is memorizing the answers, getting the answers right on the test. We are into information transfer but for the Jew, answering a question was very different. For instance, a rabbi might ask a student, "What is 2 plus 2?" We would all raise our hands, but in those days, the best way to answer a question was with another question. The rabbi would ask, "What is 2 plus 2?" Today we would spout off the answer of four, but back then a student might answer with, "Rabbi, Rabbi, what is the square root of 16?" "He is going, "Tricked! Oh, it is 4, right." You wouldn't just give the answer. You would lead him into another question because questions are what keep the dialog going, what would make the argument worthwhile. How you really learn is when you talk back and forth. That is what *Bet Talmud* is all about. Jesus learned this so well. Of the 41 questions asked of Jesus in the New Testament, 35 times Jesus answers the question with another question because Jews were taught that it was in the going back and forth that God gives *all* of the truth.

The first *Bet* is elementary school, and the second *Bet* is trade school, and at 14 where they were brought into their *Bar Mitzvah* and became young men, a very small group of them continued on in school. Almost all of the rest of them went out and learned how to be carpenters or die makers or farmers. Only a very few went to grad school, *Bet Midrash*. You might know from studying Jewish culture that the *Midrash* is the commentary on the Bible. It is not just the study of it. It is not just the questions about it. It is the going back and forth about what it really means, how it applies, the *Midrash*. It is grad school, but for the Jews, then and now, only the best and the brightest get to do that.

So at about age 14, young Harvard- and Yale- and Stanford-level Jewish boys took the next step. Everybody wanted to be a rabbi. That was the height of popularity back then. The rabbi was an important person in the community, more important than a rich person. Everybody wanted their son to be a rabbi or their daughter to marry a rabbi. So at age 14 or so, the Harvard or Yale smart ones would try to keep going and would approach a rabbi and ask if they could become the rabbi's student. That was *Bet Midrash*, becoming a student of a rabbi. To see what they knew, a rabbi might ask questions. He might say, for instance, "Young man, what does it mean to honor the Sabbath?" Well, the student might say, "Oh, oh, this is great. We are supposed to honor the Sabbath by doing absolutely nothing. It is a day off. We get to sit around." The rabbi would go crazy, "No! No! You have broken the *Torah*! No!" and the kid would slink away. The next student would come up and be asked the same question. He would say, "Sabbath? A Sabbath is to remember and reflect that we are no longer slaves. We are brought from the kingdom of darkness and redeemed by the Blood of the Lamb. Sabbath is when we devote an entire day to saying, 'I am more than a slave who builds bricks. I am designed to enjoy God.'" Then the rabbi would say, "You! Come here. Come with me."

Jesus would say the same thing, "Come with Me." The rabbi quizzed you but would rarely determine that you were good enough, that you were Harvard- or Yale- or Stanford- or Wheaton-quality. If the student was one of the rare ones in the village who passed, the rabbi would say, "Okay. Come with me and take my yoke upon you." Remember Jesus talks about taking his yoke? The yoke of a rabbi was the way that the rabbi interpreted the Bible. If you took on the yoke of a particular rabbi, you interpreted the Bible the same way. You followed God the same way. "Take my yoke upon you and follow me" means to go into *Midrash*, become a rabbi like *this* rabbi. The rabbi would say, "Take my yoke upon you, boy, and you better work hard," and he would and between the ages of 14 and 30, he would do everything just like the rabbi did.

That system continues even in Israel today, the ultra-Orthodox, whether they are in New York or Israel, trained their rabbis the same way. If you are in New York today in the garment district or the diamond district, you can see the rabbi with the hat walking down the street, and you can see two or three students walking behind him, following him. It is not uncommon for a rabbi to go into the bathroom followed by his disciples. It is on-the-job learning, on-the-job training. One quote from the *Mishna*, the Jewish oral tradition, says, "May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi." In other words, "May you get so close to your rabbi that as he walks through the streets, as he walks from path to path, village to village in the Old Testament, and is yelling and waving and teaching and kicking up dust, may you be so close that the dust of the rabbi settles upon you. May you be covered in the dust of the rabbi, you blessed ones." Well, that is good for those few people who get into Harvard or Yale, but most of the Jews did not. Most of the time the

rabbi decided, “No, obviously you know *Torah*, but you don’t have what it takes to be just like me, so go home, make babies, pray that those children become rabbis, learn a trade, learn the family business, live a good life. Maybe your kids will do better.”

That is where we are back in the text. Now look again at Mark, chapter 1. It says,

<sup>16</sup> As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

Why were they fishermen? Because they were not able to make the cut. A rabbi had probably told them that they were not holy enough, not good enough, not smart enough, and sent them to go fish. Jesus walks up to the second string, the losers, the rejects, but instead of having them ask Him, Jesus asks them, “Come, follow Me. Take My yoke upon you for My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” “Come, follow me,” Jesus says, “and I will make you rabbis. I will make you mini-Me’s, not fishers of fish but fishers of the souls of men,” and immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

Now I’ve got to tell you, I’ve read this story for 30 years, and all of a sudden it struck me as a little weird. The guy walks along the lake and says, “Come on. Let’s go.” And they just jump up and follow Him. That seemed odd to me, but doesn’t it make more sense now? Jesus is inviting them into *Bet Midrash* after they have already flunked out. The president of Harvard, the president of Yale, comes up and says, “I think you’ve got it. I think you can do this. Come on. Follow me.” Then going on from there Jesus sees two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, in a boat with their father, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left their boat, left their father, and they followed Jesus. You know what is interesting about this? The next verse does not say, “Zebedee was standing at the dock going, ‘Wait a minute. Wait a minute. What about the fish? What am I going to tell your mother?’” That is not in there because it was an honor to have your sons leave to follow a rabbi in spite of the fact that they were rich fishermen. They had employees. It was an honor, so instead of Zebedee being upset, “What am I going to tell the wife?” that night going home and saying, “The boys are gone.” “What happened? Where are the boys? Did they drown? Where have they gone?” “Well, the Rabbi Yashewa of Nazareth, He called them. They got into Harvard.”

The next day Zebedee is walking through the town and instead of whining that he is going to have to hire a new person for the boat, his chest is puffed out, and he is swaggering a little as he walks into the net store. Lucky dad. He can’t believe it. Like you and I would do, casually dropping in, “Did you hear my daughter got into Stanford? Did you hear the boy is going to Harvard? He is with Rabbi Jesus. He is going to become special.”

But the boys had done nothing that made them work harder. There was no New Year’s resolution, no Harvard degree, no getting it right every time. Instead they were just asked by King Jesus to follow Him. And following Him, getting in the dust of this different rabbi, seeing all of the odd things He did, all the strange things He taught, it changed them over time. Not because of anything they did but because they got close to the Rabbi. It even changed Peter, the blockhead. It could even change you or me.

After Jesus died, Jesus has His followers preach a sermon. In the Book of Acts it says that they stood up in front of thousands, and people were amazed. They were brought before the rabbis

to face judgment, and the rabbis were amazed. It says, "Seeing that these were uneducated fishermen, marveling at their boldness, the rabbis noted that they had been with Jesus." The dust of their rabbi had stuck to them. Jesus is still walking up to people and saying, "Come on, follow me." He wants to use you to build not *this*, but *this*, a community where people can get the dust of the rabbi into their city, into their schools, on their friends, and not even the gates of hell will be able to stop it because God says this will happen.

Christ is walking down the beach toward you right now saying "The time is now. *This* is the important time. Come and follow me." Not a New Year's resolution. Not a try harder, not a get the answer right. Can you get up and follow Him in a fresh way? One of the hymns in our tradition that talks about following Jesus says, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love." So many of you have at different times said you wanted to follow the Rabbi. You wanted to get the dust of the Rabbi on you, but prone to wander, you have slipped to a different way, and you need to, again, repent, and turn toward the Rabbi in the new year, get so close that the dust of the Rabbi brings grace and life and hope and healing to you.

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