

**“AT HAND”:
WHAT THE COMING OF CHRIST MEANS AND DOESN’T MEAN
Mark 1:14-20**

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on January 24, 2021, the Third Sunday after Epiphany. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

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.” As 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. 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.

I.

In the early 1980s, when I was just starting out as a preacher, the text for the day was the call of the first disciples of Jesus: Simon and Andrew, James and John. I entitled my sermon “Letters from James and John,” and I constructed it as a series of imaginary letters that two of the disciples who were brothers, James and John, wrote home to their mother during the course of the three years they were following after Jesus had called them from fishing with their father Zebedee on the Sea of Galilee in the business they shared with him.

Some people in the congregation loved the sermon, if for no other reason than it was different, a young preacher trying to find his voice experimenting with a new style of preaching. Others in the congregation scowled because it wasn’t of the “three points and a poem” style they were used to and thought every sermon was supposed to be.

But the passage and the sermon have stuck with me over the years because of that early encounter with it.

What strikes me about the sermon now – almost forty years later – is that by looking at the impact of Christ’s call on James and John, we get a glimpse of what the birth of Jesus Christ into our world *meant to them* and *means to us*, what is *did not mean* to them and *does not mean* to us. An important distinction.

You see, there is something about us that is inclined to think that since the great and majestic God of the Old Testament pitched his tent among us¹ – was born in a manger, greeted by shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, angels filling the heavens with glorious music, and magi from the mysterious East bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh² – given *all* this that we are told has happened, why hasn’t the world become more fully redeemed, at least in ways we can see, touch, feel?

Whether we are the firmest believer in the room or someone stretching a hand just to touch the hem of Christ’s garment, whether we are “Christ centered” or “Christ haunted,” we know that bad things still happen:

- People we love dearly fall ill
- Some die young, quite suddenly
- People are hungry

¹ John 1:14. “Pitched his tent” is a literal translation of “lived among us,” I understand.

² Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2.

- People are homeless
- People are naked
- People are addicted
- Lazarus may rise from the dead, but he will die again³
- Like Abraham and Jochebed, Moses' mother, some of us will allow our children to be lead into the wilderness or placed in a basket in the bulrushes, hoping someone, human or divine, sent by God, will see them through and protect them.⁴

Yes, Christ has come, we believe or want to believe, but there are still

- Wars and rumors of war
- Plague and pestilence
- Corruption and greed
- Racism and genocide
- A nagging ache to much of life
- Dull mindedness among many, small mindedness among some, and intellectual arrogance among a self-selected few.

“Vanity of vanities,” says Qoheleth. “All is vanity...What has been is what will be. What has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.”⁵

In light of the birth of Christ, we had thought things were supposed to be different.

II.

I'm always looking for an excuse read the King James Version of the Bible, and this week's sermon title – “At Hand” – gives me such permission. “At Hand.”

The text begins: “Now after...John [the Baptist] was put in prison” – no small reminder that the world in which Jesus was about to begin his preaching and teaching was still a *fallen* world, a world with both the *need* for fiery prophets like John and the *tendency* to lock them up for being fiery.

The text continues: “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is *at hand*: repent...and believe the gospel.’”

Jesus then proceeds – in stories many of us learned early in Sunday School – to call his first four disciples: Simon and Andrew, James and John. They were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. When he called them they dropped their nets and followed Jesus. Within minutes, four of the initial twelve disciples were signed, sealed and delivered.

But there is a detail about the call of the last two – James and John – that caught my attention fortysomething years ago and holds it today: The text says James and John “left *their father Zebedee* in the *ship* with the hired *servants*” and “went after” Jesus.

Think about what is likely going on here.

- Zebedee has an established fishing business, like the lobstermen and women we know and see every summer in Maine.

³ John 11:1-16; 12:9-11.

⁴ Genesis 17 and Exodus 2.

⁵ Ecclesiastes 1.

- He owns his own boat, that the New Testament calls a “ship.”
- His two sons, James and John, work with him in the business.
- And he has at least more than one hired servant.

Jesus doesn’t appear to call Zebedee to be a disciple, and when James and John accept the call, they leave behind their *father*, the *nets* they were mending, the *business* that he had developed and in which they worked, the *boat* the business own, and *several other people* who drew their livelihood from the business. The presence of Christ in the world – even within their own family – did not prevent stress on the family fishing business, perhaps even leading to its closing.

**

Many of us are aware of the closing of small businesses these days. Atlantis Restaurant up the street – a restaurant to which I never go without seeing Westminster members – is closing. After 38 years. Employees laid off. Retirement plans accelerated with less resources with which to support retirement. Years of labor and service disappearing. Whoosh. Gone.

Perhaps I shouldn’t say this: But I haven’t taken an article of clothing to the dry cleaner since the shutdown began. There is no reason to dry clean jeans! But I have not had the heart to call the owner of the small dry cleaner in the building in Old Town where we used to live (where I have always gone back to take my dry cleaning out of loyalty, even though we moved to this neighborhood eight years ago). I just don’t want to learn that the business has closed. Whoosh. Gone.

You see: the coming of Christ, his birth, his call to his disciples, his teaching, his miracles, his death, even his resurrection and ascension do not obliterate all human pain, all human misfortune, all human sin, all human mendacity, all human hurt, all human tragedy. At least not yet. Even when James and John were called by Christ and accepted that call, they “left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants.” Perhaps it was not the right thing to do, or perhaps at least not the right time. But to be sure the call and its acceptance did not end all misfortune and may even have created some for Zebedee.

III.

I have shared with you before a concept developed by my theology professor, Dr. Christopher Morse, who visited Westminster several years ago. He developed a statement that describes the Christian life.

We are *on hand*
For the reign and rule of God that is *at hand*
But not *in hand*.⁶

**

Let’s take the middle sentence first: “The Kingdom of God is at hand.”⁷

⁶ Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (New York: Continuum, 2009) 159-161.

⁷ Morse writes: “At hand” is a term used in the New Testament...in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke...in introducing the accounts of Jesus’ preaching and teaching: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mat.4:17) “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel.” (Mark 1:15) Paul, referring to the risen Christ, uses the same term in writing to the Philippians, “The Lord is at hand...” (Phil. 4:5).

A basic and fundamental belief of Christian faith is that there is a God, and that God has become a human being in the person of Jesus Christ and in doing so God has brought the reign and rule and way of God to earth. Here and now.

Something is different. Something is changed. Something new is present. Someone is present. The kingdom of God is *at hand*.

But even the most devout and committed among us know that this something that is new and different and *at hand* is *not fully complete*. It is as if the drawbridge across the moat to the castle has been lowered, the doors have begun to creak open, but castle is so veiled and covered in cloud and fog that we cannot quite see where to step, where to walk. In Morse's words: "The kingdom of God is *at hand*, but it is not *in hand*." Though the drawbridge is down, we cannot yet cross over the moat to enter the castle fully.

IV.

But neither do we have to turn our backs and retreat to the village in defeat or desolation. As Morse's first statement says: "We are *on hand* for the kingdom of God. We are *on hand* for the reign and rule of God which is *at hand* but not *in hand*."

- Being *on hand* means being, like Simeon waiting all those years in the Temple for the Christ child to be born and presented,⁸ that we are so on the lookout for signs, glimpses, in-breakings of the reign of God that we act as if that for which we are waiting is fully here.
- Being *on hand* is arriving at the church and dressing for the wedding before we walk down the aisle.
- Being *on hand* is buying our ticket and putting on our favorite jersey and arriving at the stadium and taking our seat well before the opening kickoff.
- Being *on hand* is worshipping, serving, learning, making and deepening relationships in the community of faith, living toward that day when we will be reunited with the cloud of witnesses who have gone before,⁹ and when, in the new heaven and new earth, we will see the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, and we shall hear a loud voice from the throne, proclaiming, "The home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes."¹⁰
- Being *on hand* is discerning – and seeking to create – places in our world when "justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,"¹¹ and then placing our rafts on those ever-flowing waters, not just on weekend outings but every day and place in our lives.
- Being *on hand* is stopping and engaging with the blanketed woman outside Starbucks with a coffee can in her hand, and trying to discern and act on what leads far too many people to live in that condition and seek food and nourishment that way.

⁸ Luke 2.

⁹ Hebrews 12:1.

¹⁰ Revelation 21:1-5.

¹¹ Amos 5:24.

- Being *on hand* is trying to listen and engage with someone whose reasons for voting are so different from yours you are not sure you can stay in the same room, better yet sit at the same table, break bread. sip from the same cup.
- Being *on hand* is sticking with this congregation and supporting it so well that we are hopefully more than halfway through this pandemic with unscarred pocketbooks.
- Being *on hand* is reaching out to Pastor Whitney in the tragedy that has come upon her like a thief in the night, supporting her with cards and letters and prayers, being ready to contribute to her financial support when the for her long-term needs become clearer and planning more precise.
- Being *on hand* is consistently and patiently working for the best solution you can find
 - in your own personal habits and patterns
 - in your closest relationship
 - in your marriage
 - in your family
 - in your working relationships
 - in your community
 - in your involvement with our nation's governance
 - in your involvement with people of other colors or cultures or religions or races.

Morse equates being “on hand” with living towards “a *yet to be completed arrival* that is *already changing the scene*.”¹² When we are *on hand*, we are part of changing the scene.

The reign and rule of God is *at hand*, and while don't have it *in hand* and never will it until it becomes final, every way that we are *on hand* for it matters: to us, to God, to the world.

Amen.

¹² Morse 162.