

*"Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him." [Mark 1:17-18]*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ and people of God in the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

The bulk of our Gospel readings in the year 2018 will be from the Gospel according to Mark.

Though Mark is the shortest of the four gospels, the word *immediately* appears more frequently than any other book in the Bible. Bible translations differ in the exact number of times the word is used, but they concur on the disproportionate abundance of its occurrence.

There's no doubt that *immediately* seems to be Mark's favorite word.

In Mark, Jesus is a God of action, performing miracles and casting out demons at every drop of the hat and turn of the page. Mark doesn't waste too much time explaining things. The Gospel is all action, hardly any analysis. We are left to figure many things out for ourselves, given little to no reasoning.

Why this sense of urgency in this one gospel? What is it that Mark wants us to see about this characteristic behavior of Jesus?

Though Mark appears second in the New Testament, scholars agree that it was the first written account of the ministry of Jesus. That ministry began in Galilee, where he went about preaching, teaching, and healing; proclaiming the message that the Kingdom of God had come near.

That begs yet another question, what exactly is the Kingdom of God?

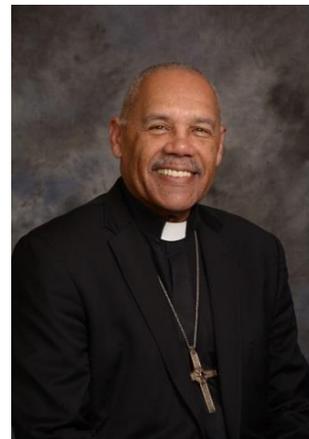
Note first that Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, not in the large, urban area of Jerusalem. Galilee

was a small town on the margins of Jewish society. Tradition tells us that it is a place of political upheaval. Historians attest that many Galileans in Jesus' day were hot-headed radicals, preaching rebellion against their Roman overlords.

In similar fashion, our era has been called the Age of Anxiety. Over the past couple decades, this society has been hammered economically, physically, politically and spiritually. There's a general culture of fear and anger that pervades our lives, coupled with the petty political bickering over healthcare, immigration, and other important legislation that paralyzes our federal government and puts our general welfare at risk. There's the gun violence that lays waste to humanity and endangers the safety of both citizens and those who are paid to protect them. Economic disparity creates a massive division between rich and poor.

Many of us can no longer remember a time when we weren't undergoing security screenings at airports, and passing through metal detectors in public buildings. I know how irritating they are to me, and they're most likely the same for you.

The society has become coarse and degraded. People are going hungry. Others lack access to



safe drinking water. We cannot remain unaware of the injustice around us as long as people are being singled out for the color of their skin or the accent with which they speak. The distrust of government and politicians is gigantic. The relationships that used to connect us with others have literally vanished. It is difficult for our secular world to trust in God, when anxiety rules.

As people of God, we are called to be better than that. That is the message for the church and the mission of the church.

In a world with so much need for love – the kind of unconditional love that God offers – The call of Jesus means that no one can wait for that love for one more minute. Jesus made clear that the kingdom of God is most concerned with the forgotten, the rejected, the excluded, the lost, the last, the least, the downtrodden.

The kingdom of God is where the shape of life mirrors God's design for life. It is where God's desires, God's dreams for this creation, God's will and God's intentions rule.

For you and me, that means reaching out and touching people in the name of Jesus, bringing healing, liberation, renewal. It means loving people even when they don't necessarily seem very lovable. Caring for them at the level where they make major changes in the direction of their lives. It calls for guiding them into new ways of looking at life, establishing new priorities, a return to the God of compassion and justice.

Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is known to most of us today as "evangelism." It is not easy. You may encounter resistance, rejection,

even hostility. But Jesus has a message that's too immediate – too urgent – for us to wait. He has called us to follow him and join him in bringing the good news of the kingdom to others.

Our Northeastern Ohio Synod last year created the Discipling and Evangelizing Table, a team of dedicated clergy and laypeople who are taking on the responsibility of equipping others to develop the language of faith that will make them better disciples and witnesses to the presence of Jesus in our midst. Pastor Jim Watson of Zion Lutheran Church in Valley City, chairs that Table. He and the other members of the Table are available as resources to aid your congregation.

I pray that 2018 is the year you will make a dedicated effort to be the voice, the eyes, the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. This is what evangelism is about - telling others what they need to hear - telling others how God - in Christ - has touched you and given you what you need. Evangelism is one person concerned about another, and sharing that which has made the difference to them.

People are hungry to hear the good news. They want something in their lives that is better than what they have; they want God to touch them as they see God has touched others. That is what Jesus came to do, that is what we are asked to do in His name – *immediately!*

In Christ,



The Rev. Abraham D. Allende,  
Bishop