



INITIATED INTO GOD'S NOW

A Sermon on Mark 1:14-20—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart

January 21, 2018—First United Church of Christ (Cong.), Milford, CT

1.

After that scripture reading I wanted to talk about this young, Jewish man who many years ago went out on his own, spoke to some people, and gained a following along the way: Jerry Seinfeld.

Seinfeld observes humor in the mundane aspects of life. In a recent special Seinfeld used routines from his early stand-up years in New York City to showcase the material that propelled him to television and fame.

“I saw an ad for a mattress store a couple of months ago,” Seinfeld says. “‘No payments ‘til June.’ Because they know that our [silly] brain is going to go, ‘Oh, June? Well, that’s not really my problem, then, is it? It’ll probably never be June, anyway. That’s June guy’s problem.’”

“Same for when you’re watching TV late at night, right? And you’re tired, and you’re binge-watching all your little...shows...What about work tomorrow? You’ve got to get up, go to work. ‘Ah, that’s morning guy’s problem. I’m night guy: Party rocks on for night guy. Fire up another episode, crack open another sleeve of Oreos. No rules for night guy!’”

“Then the next morning, the alarm goes off, you’re trashed, crumbs in the bed. ‘Why did I do that? I HATE YOU, NIGHT GUY!’”

“Because night guy [makes life miserable for] morning guy. Nothing morning guy can do.

“He turns into coffee-all-day guy, who’s then can’t-sleep-at-night guy, totally-trashed-doesn’t-do his-work guy, and out-of-a-job guy.

“Does night guy care? No. He’s sleeping on a brand-new mattress, courtesy of no-payments-‘til-June guy.”ⁱ

2.

Today’s gospel reading from Mark comes soon after the story of John baptizing Jesus. Mark doesn’t wait a beat to move on, writing, so John gets arrested and Jesus starts preaching what John had preached before, “The Kingdom of God is almost here!” Jesus is God’s here guy. No stopping ‘God is here’ guy. His party gets rockin’. Jesus heads to the Sea of Galilee where he comes across a couple pairs of fishermen brothers, hard at work, Peter and Andrew; then James and John with their dad Zebedee in the boat with them.

Jesus cuts to the chase: follow me. He even adds a clever metaphorical job description, follow me and I’ll make you fishers of people! To which the two pairs of young fishermen surprisingly say, ‘Sure, sounds good! We may be out of a job as fishermen, but we don’t have to pay for our mattresses until June anyway. That’s June fisherman’s problem. Right now, party rocks on with Jesus: God here guy!’

If you’re like me, I get a little upset at the first four disciples. It all seems so irresponsible, right? Drop everything, follow Jesus who hasn’t even established himself at that point as the Savior, the Son of God that the church now declares him to be. The young fishermen follow Unproven Jesus guy. Contrast that to churches in western cultures now that have a hard time convincing folks to get out of bed a little early one day a week for worship, to volunteer a little to help people in need, and to give some

of their treasure for the sake of following Jesus together. Maybe we get upset with those first disciples because we resent them: those first disciples make us look a little foolish because they drop everything while we feel ambivalent about dropping just a little of our lives to rock on with Jesus. 'Sorry, Jesus, I'm gotta-pay-for-the-mattress guy.' Sorry, Jesus, I'm binge-watching-shows guy. Nothing I can do.'

3.

There IS something we can do. Just look at the disciples.

How do they do it? How do they drop everything?

Does Jesus use a savior mind trick on them?

'This fishing, this is not the life you're looking for.'

'This fishing is not the life we're looking for.'

'You want to be fishers of men.'

*'We want to be fishers of men.'*ⁱⁱ

No, that's not what gets them to leave their lives behind them (although that would have been a very clever way to do it!). No, instead I think Jesus taps into what John the Baptist and now he are preaching about God.

The Greek in Mark 1 can be translated in slightly different ways, because of verb tense stuff: Jesus may be saying 'the kingdom of God has drawn near' or 'the Kingdom of God is upon us' or 'it is here'. At the very least, there's an imminent, God's just around the corner meaning, and possibly a God is here, right here right now meaning to it.

Let's assume that the fishermen have heard Jesus preach about the Kingdom of God coming soon or now, and then he reaches out to them to follow him. Jesus invites them into God's now, into something that God is doing, perhaps something that God is doing through Jesus and by extension those who follow him. That begins

to sound like something that a young man might be willing to drop everything for, what they're looking for.

Just think about young people today, or going back to our own days of youth. On a Friday night or a Saturday, what do young people go searching for? A good time is one way of putting it, but another way of saying it is The Sacred Now. A glimpse of the sacred here and now. I don't think they know if they're looking for God, but whatever they're searching for, they hope to know it if they experience it. Of course then there are sectors of society that work hard to convince young people that such sacred glimpses come in the form of pleasures and intimacies that their parents and families don't approve of, right? Sex, drugs and rock-n-roll not only give people a high but also usually mortify parents, so it does double duty there.

4.

The church and faith have a better, more genuine Sacred Now to offer youth, but first we have to stop framing God mostly in yesterdays and tomorrows. Our church for instance is great at talking about God 2,000 years ago or God who inspired us to found the church in 1639. At memorials and funerals I am good at evoking God who will gather us together in heaven when we all die. But most of us hear that and we say, "That's 1639 guy's joy or dead guy's joy. What about the sacred joy of now?"

When we talk about the sacred now in society it's often about God in nature, and that's good and right on, nothing wrong about seeds and trees, the circle of life, purple mountain's majesty and amber waves of grain. Let's stand in awe and care for God's creation, that's a major mission that I believe that the church needs to sign on to.

But in the Christian faith, God's now isn't just double rainbows and pretty sunsets. God's now according to Christian faith is the relationship with God who goes beyond creating to show up and invite us into ministry, the God who offers us forgiveness and unconditional love right now and invites us to follow him by sharing that forgiveness and unconditional love, too. This is what Jesus ushers his first followers into, a sacred moment of experiencing and participating in God's grace.

When Christians talk about grace it's amazing it's sacred, it's now, it's the sacred now to feel loved by God and to be a part of a community that experiences and shares that love together.

This is what we tap into when our youth participate in mission trips, the sacred now of seeing God in neighbors in need, the sacred now of dropping the life we think was ours only to find out that following Jesus transforms us in wonderful ways, the sacred now of following Christ together. This is what we tap into when we serve on ministries together, setting up grace-filled opportunities for people young and old.

This is what we enact and tap into during our sacraments, our official sacred moments of the church—God's now. In communion, we are sustained by God's now, God with us in the bread and juice, God with us through thick and thin. In baptism, we introduce the baptizes into God's undying love and we re-experience that love that invites us into Christian ministry now.

If we're a baby, then we may minister simply by being a gift from God and beautiful to behold, a reminder that just as we rely on people, all people rely on God. If we are older, we may minister by reaching out to people in need, experiencing the sacred now of being Christ's hands and feet in the world. Maybe we experience sacred nows as we share the Good News with children in Sunday school or with a neighbor, friend, or co-worker who yearns for God's now but doesn't know where to look yet.

God transforms us through sacred nows into faithful men and women, still imperfect, still torn by priorities, but grounded in God who loves us now.

Jesus didn't just reach out to Peter and Andrew, James and John with God's grace then; we care about that story because Jesus reaches out to us and invites us into the sacred now of January 21, 2018, to experience the party rocking on with Christ and those who drop at least some of our worries and misguided priorities at the lakeshore.

The party of Christian faith rocks on today, with its costs and its joys. Come on in, the water's fine, warmed by the jets of the Holy Spirit. Come on in, and bring your friends and neighbors who like Jesus guy but didn't know that a church could live and follow Jesus this way.

Jesus calls out to you to follow him now. And now. And every now from here on. Thanks be to God and Amen.

ⁱ *Jerry Before Seinfeld*, Netflix, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Thank you, Obi Wan Kenobi!