

“Ready, Set, Go”

Matthew 4: 12-23; Psalm 27

Sometimes it is hard to start out on something new, some new project. Perhaps there has been much going on beforehand, and it seems to continue afterwards. Maybe the thing just popped up, all of a sudden, but at the right time, too, somehow.

I can think of two such experiences in my own life. One, has to do with children. Each time I had a baby, it was wonderful! I fell in love with each of them. I had been wanting them so much. And, I felt absolutely terrible physically; all I wanted to do was sleep. Here was this darling baby whom I had waited for anxiously, and wanted so much, wanted to be with and look after and play with, and yet, I was just dragging. Can any of you mothers relate to that?

The other time was when I was in high school. It was summertime, and my mother got a great job offer. Later on, she told me it had been the answer to a prayer. It was just what she needed, just what our family needed. But, my sister and I were completely not excited about this. Who was going to drive us here and there? I did not have a driver's license yet. Why now, during our summer vacation? It was too sudden, as far as we rather spoiled and foolish daughters were concerned.

Well, Jesus began his ministry when a lot of things were going on, things which were happening to him and around him.

First of all, he had been baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. During this, God's voice had spoken: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3: 17)

That had to be a wonderful experience. However. You know, if the sentence starts with the word ‘however’, watch out! (The Man Who Met God in a Bar, by Robert Farrar Capon)

However, right after this wonderful time of his baptism, “. . . Jesus was led up by the [Holy] Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” (Matthew 4: 1)

Going from a beautiful time, with God's approval, to a time of tempting by the devil! That sounds like starting the meal with dessert, and ending it with some nasty-tasting burnt vegetable!

But, the time of testing was an important part of the preparation for Jesus. Jesus resisted each temptation, He passed those tests. "Then the devil left, and suddenly angels came and waited on [Jesus]." (Matthew 4 11)

Once again, things were looking up. And you know, Jesus might have felt as exhausted as we can, when life is such a roller-coaster of ups and downs.

Then, came the bad news. John, his own cousin, had been arrested. That was very bad news; jails then were worse than now, very harsh.

John the Baptist was not arrested for committing a crime, or any real wrongdoing. He was arrested because he spoke out about King Herod being married to his sister-in-law, Herodias. That might not sound so bad, but it was, because of all the circumstances (sorry, about all the same first names, Herod):

"After Herodias' first marriage to Herod **Philip**, history records, she lived in Rome, where her husband had been exiled and disinherited because his mother had taken part in a plot against his father **Herod the Great**. There Herodias and her husband, Herod **Philip**, entertained as their guest, her husband's half-brother Herod **Antipas**. He had come to Rome to receive his investiture as tetrarch [small-time king] and at this time was married to the daughter of King Aretas of Arabia.

Herod **Antipas**, while a guest in his half-brother's home, indulged in a guilty relationship with [that half-brother's] wife, Herodias. Desiring to be closer to the throne that she could ever be with her present husband, a more retiring man, Herodias was willing to pay any price for a regal position, regardless of principles or people involved.

She persuaded Herod **Antipas** to divorce his wife, and she in turn divorced her husband and left Rome for Tiberias, the capital city of the province of Galilee, where Herod **Antipas** was now tetrarch [the small-time king]." (All the Women in the Bible, by Edith Deen.)

Not exactly the right way to get married, huh? So, John the Baptist, was put in jail, for objecting to it all.

That had to be on Jesus' mind. As it turned out, it got much worse for John later, too. Apparently, though, it was not God's plan to have John freed. No, it was time for Jesus to begin his ministry. He was to begin what he had been sent to earth to do.

"From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" (Matthew 4: 17)

According to my Bible footnotes, "In asserting that God's *kingdom has come near*, Jesus meant that all God's past dealings with his creation were coming to climax and fruition. Jesus taught both the present reality of God's rule and its future realization." (Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.)

The Message version of the Bible puts it this way: "He [Jesus] picked up where John left off: Change your life. God's kingdom is here."

So, there is Step One—Jesus proclaimed, Jesus preached.

Then, Jesus started calling disciples, the men who would help him, accompany him on his traveling ministry, and continue his word. In these particular verses, Jesus called Simon Peter and Andrew, then James and John. These men were ordinary fishermen. Jesus called them, and they came, right away. Jesus did not force them to become his disciples or pay them or trick them or anything like that. He called and they came. That was Step Two.

Lastly, was that Jesus got started, full on, full force: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom [of heaven] and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." (Matthew 4: 23).

Or, we can use this version of the Bible: "From there he went all over Galilee. He used synagogues for meeting places and taught people the truth of God. God's kingdom was his theme—that beginning right now they were under God's government, a good government! He also healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects of their bad lives." (Message) That was Step Three.

With this beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth, the kingdom of heaven began here on earth. It continues to this day, and will in the future. It is what we say in the Lord's Prayer: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus keeps telling everything we need to know—sometimes in the Bible, sometimes in other ways.

Jesus keeps calling people to be his disciples—the ones to carry on his work. The qualifications have broadened beyond what these Bible verses have implied; now anyone can be Jesus' disciples and followers, even if they were not fishermen at first. Rather, it takes belief and commitment to be Christians, Jesus' disciples.

And, Jesus continues to teach and heal, sometimes through Christians, sometimes in other ways, always with love and care and power.

So began the Christian faith. It is such a blessing to us, and to all people! Just imagine what the world would be like without the Christian faith—awful.

That is why we are here today. We worship God. We re-commit to Christianity. We are with our brothers and sisters in Christ. I sometimes say that worship is a re-charging of the batteries of the soul. We get some umph, some spiritual umph.

Then, we have Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday to use it all up, as we deal with this world. We use it to put as much goodness and love and honesty and mercy and justice into the world as we can. We carry on the work and transformation which our Lord Jesus began. Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, January 26, 2020.