

In one of the most memorable movies from the 1980's, a movie you have likely seen, a successful musician has her life turned upside down when an evil demigod takes possession of her body. And it gets worse: As the plot develops, we learn that it's not just her that's under attack. – It's not just an isolated case. No, Dana Barrett's possession is only a part of a worldwide supernatural plan that is beginning to unfold, – hidden beneath the throbbing urban rhythms of New York City. We learn the that demigod's name is Zuul. He is in the service of a forgotten Ancient Mesopotamian god called Gozer the Destructor, who plans to open the gate between dimensions and destroy the world as we know it. Only the courage of discredited scientist Dr. Peter Venkman and his team stand between our world and oblivion. The name of his team – and the movie, of course, – is “Ghostbusters.” +++ Soon after Dana (played by Sigourney Weaver) is possessed, Dr. Venkman (Bill Murray) shows up at her apartment door. And, though distracted by Zuul's attempts to, shall we say, distract him, Peter is steadfast in his attempt to drive the demon out.: “Now, I'm gonna count to three, Zuullie, and if I don't get to talk to Dana, there's going to be some real trouble in this apartment I think. **One**... (*discomforting otherworldly growls emerge from Dana*)... **Two**... (*now her eyes roll back in her head and the growling becomes threatening*) ... **Two and a half**... (*clearly unphased by the counting, Dana levitates from the bed and spins around in mid-air, continuing her demonic growls*)” ... Peter never makes it to three. +++ And Zuul stays firmly imbedded in Dana – *at least for now*. +++ +++ Now, I know it's not always the case – like for a lot of parents, they only have to say, “ONE” to get exactly what they want... But some people take it as a challenge – they dig in, making a show out of ignoring you. Daring you to say “Three” because then you'd have to do whatever your implied, or explicit, threat is. +++ So, you extend it, like Peter

Venkman... “Two... Two and Half... Two and Three Quarters... Two and Four Fifths.”
... What you don’t realize is, you lost all credibility at “Two and a Half.” After that, they know you don’t want to make it to three any more than they want you to. Too much trouble – you didn’t want to actually DO something – you just wanted to have your own way. +++... +++ And, when kids do it to each other, it’s even worse. “Two and Seven Eighths... Two and Eight Ninths... Two and Nine Tenths...” Eventually, they get to the ultimate double-dog-dare of all Warning Counts... “Two and 99/100’s.” *Oh my* – that’s serious business! +++ Except, of course, it’s really not. By that point, nobody is going to give in. It’s understood that whatever is so urgent for me isn’t urgent at all to you. – And, of course, nobody wants to back down, either. +++ ||| +++ I think this *counting-to-three* thing could be the mascot of how we humans interact with each other. Too often, it’s just not *real* interaction at all, is it? So much of it is bluster... – talking past one another without listening... – posturing. +++ “Two and 99/100’s” +++ We don’t even mean it when we say it... and our listener certainly isn’t taking it seriously. +++ +++ Too often,... we’re just unwilling to truly respond to each other. – We’re unwilling to change. – Unwilling to drop what we’re doing for someone else – unwilling to let ourselves see the world through their eyes. +++ +++

I think today’s scripture readings call us out on this. And – asks the question: “Is that also how you respond to God?” +++ The Lord calls Jonah to prophesy in Nineveh, “*Forty more days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” +++ Paul tells the church in Corinth they need to rethink all their priorities, and do it soon, because “*the present form of the world is passing away.*” +++ And Jesus shows up in Galilee with an unexpected urgent message: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*” +++ There’s no 2 ½, 2 ¾, 2 99/100. +++ It’s happening, NOW. So, I’d like to look at these passages with you this morning to see

what they tell us about how we **LISTEN**+++ and, more importantly, how **seriously** we **RESPOND**, +++ to God.

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So far, prior to today's reading, Jesus still has not spoken a word. It's like he's waiting for something really important to say. +++ Still, we do know a few things about him. We discovered at his baptism that Jesus is divine, the Son of God, bound up with the Father and the Holy Spirit since Creation. We learned that he would be a troublemaker – a threat to both religious and political authorities. And, we learned that through baptism in Christ, we receive the *free gift* of the Holy Spirit working in our own lives.

Mark moves fast – after all that, we are still just 14 verses into the Gospel – and Jesus is finally ready to speak his first words... +++ ... I think it's *important* to pay attention to the first words that come out of Jesus' mouth – in **each** gospel. It tells us a lot about what follows – about the particular focus of that entire gospel. +++ +++ +++ And **here**... in **Mark...**, Jesus' **identity**, his *backstory*, will **still** be a mystery... There is no birth narrative in Mark. – Jesus *hadn't spoken* when he appeared out of nowhere and first approached John... He *hadn't spoken* at his own baptism. He *hadn't spoken* when Satan tempted him... But NOW, he speaks – *and the urgency of his mission is suddenly crystal-clear*:: Jesus first words in the Gospel of Mark are these: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” +++ I *usually* really prefer the New Revised Standard Version – but in this case I think it loses some of the urgency... What is Jesus really saying here? Let's look at the Common English Bible version to see if it might strike a little closer to home:: Jesus says, “**NOW is the time!** ... Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news! **Follow** me and I will make you fish for people.” +++ >>> “**NOW is the time!** ... Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and

trust this good news! **Follow me** and I will make you fish for people... +++ Jesus is announcing that God Almighty has entered history – in the flesh! +++ The kingdom has arrived! +++ Everything you thought you knew – is changing! +++ +++ Sometimes, I think it would help us understand Jesus better if we could get rid of that peaceful image of him in our minds: Jesus in his long, clean, flowing robes standing by a tranquil sea, calling out to fishermen who inexplicably leave everything behind and follow him as the birds sing and the sun sets over the water. – **This** is more like standing on train tracks with the train barreling towards us – and Jesus shouting at the last second, “The train is upon us – come on – you can get on it with me – or just stand there... Let’s Go!” +++ +++ Jesus doesn’t try to “talk us into it.” +++ “Come on, guys, I’ll be your best friend if you come **now**.” +++ There’s no 2... and a haaaalf... 2 and threeee quaaarters... +++ In fact, Jesus doesn’t even introduce himself first. ... “*Good afternoon, my name is Jesus... I’m the Son of God... I’ll tell you more about myself later but first I’m wondering if you’d like to come on an adventure with...*” ... None of that. +++ Just, **“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”**

And in these few words from Jesus, these four fishermen *wake up* to what is happening in the world around them and find a new purpose for their lives. They still don’t really *know* anything in particular about this man who just appeared out of the wilderness. – They don’t really *understand* everything that is at stake. +++ But they know the world has changed forever – and they have a chance to be a part of it. –And they’ve been invited to help others be part of it, too. +++ Jesus has turned their world upside down... +++ And that’s what Paul tells the church in Corinth in today’s short epistle reading. See, like us and most Christians we know, the Corinthians are pretty comfortable with their lives and their faith. They are also pretty satisfied with how their church gets along with the rest of the town. They reckon they’ve got it all figured out – but Paul tells them

to forget all that – it’s *time* to be Uncomfortable – *the world is upside down!* +++ And he tells them to change everything - NOW: “Let those who have wives be as though they had none,” Paul says..., “and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions... For the present form of this world is passing away!!” +++

Start over. Find a new purpose. And do it now! +++ ... +++ It’s all a bit unsettling, isn’t it? It’s so easy to tell ourselves that God doesn’t really expect us to change too much; – that Christians can just settle into our communities and into our churches, – show up at church (or not), – try to be “good people.” ... And that’s enough – right? We don’t have to make too many waves or take the problems of the world on our shoulders. – *Christ comes to us* where we are and makes everything better. – Right? +++ It’s “Full-Service Christianity.” +++... But these four fishermen who drop their nets, their boats, and their families to go change the world with this man they’ve never met ... they tell us that Jesus is asking for so much more than that. Jesus isn’t just asking for what’s comfortable to give – Jesus is asking for everything. When Paul strips away everything the Corinthians thought they knew about the world – tells them to rethink and upend their lives and do it now +++ he is asking for so much more as well.

So, I start thinking again the way we count to three, – how it reflects the bluster that’s beneath so much of our interactions. – How we talk past each other, – posturing. How we listen to respond instead of listening to understand, – spending most of our conversation time just waiting to add our 2 cents. +++ And that’s when we’re talking to people we agree with! We’re downright suspicious and cynical about people we don’t agree with. They’ve been listening to lies, after all. They are trying to rewrite history. They watch the wrong news channel. +++ So – that’s our pattern, I think. We ignore

people we agree with and disregard those we don't. +++ +++ It's as though most of our dialogue – especially our *national* dialogue – is all somewhere between 2 ½ and 2 99/100. +++ Both ways. +++ No motivation to listen or understand – no motivation to actually say 3 and make something happen for once. Unwilling to drop what *we're* doing for someone else, – or to let ourselves see the world through *their* eyes. +++ +++ >>> And all of this makes me wonder: Is that how we listen to God? Is that how we receive the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives – nudging us to change – calling us to serve. And is it how we respond to these words from Jesus Christ that could not be more urgent:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; *repent*, and believe in the good news... Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” +++ When you read these burning words, what do you hear? – What are you motivated to DO? +++ Do you think Christ is saying 2 ½, 2 ¾, 2 99/100? +++ Because *HE'S NOT!!* +++

THAT'S what *Jonah* seems to think when God calls *him* to deliver that warning to Nineveh we read about this morning. Jonah had run away because he didn't want to do it, mainly because *he* doesn't want to see Nineveh get saved. In fact, afterwards, Jonah is angry with the Lord. He tells God that's why he ran away. He complains, “I *knew* that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” +++ Like that's a bad thing! +++ But, in the final verse of the book, the Lord pushes back on Jonah: “Should I NOT be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” +++ +++ Jonah hadn't taken the Lord's command seriously. – He hadn't taken it urgently. He hadn't tried to comprehend what God might be up to; – what God cared about. Maybe he thought he could call the Lord's bluff, – as though when the Almighty

commanded him to GO to Nineveh, there was a 2 ½ hidden in there somewhere. +++
There was not. +++ And when they finally do get the message: that Nineveh would be
overthrown in 40 days. Everything they knew would be gone – their world would
change. +++ *Nineveh* **heard** God’s warning. **They believed** it and they **repented** –
proclaiming a fast and wearing sackcloth. They **turned away from evil** – and so God
had mercy on them and they were saved. +++ +++ As reluctant as Jonah had been to
follow God’s call, – when he *did*, finally, follow God’s command, – Jonah – the guy
who just wanted to be left alone – changed the world.

Jonah teaches us that God doesn’t call us to do **nothing.** – Believers are called to **action.**
When **Christ** calls us, it’s not a call to settle back and be comfortable with the *status
quo*. Christ calls us to see what’s happening in the world around us – to understand the
urgency of the kingdom – and to respond boldly... To make a difference. +++ +++ This
week, we’ll celebrate the memory of **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** ... When Dr. King
was called by God into ministry – and to activism – ... like the fishermen disciples, he
woke up to what was happening around him and found a new purpose for his life. **Now
is the time!, Jesus said to him.** And, he boldly went where he was called... Let me
repeat for you the words of Dr. Shirley Cherry, who is the director of Tour Guides at
Dexter Parsonage in Montgomery, AL., where Dr. King lived during the 1950’s... She
remembers his moment of clarity – his vision for how to move forward – and how it
changed the world: “Martin Luther King said, you have to do two things to be free,”
recalls Cherry. “Number one, you have to forgive everyone for everything they’ve ever
done to you. And number 2, you have to lose your fear of death. See, it’s not how *long*
you live but how *well* you live. **And so, he lost his fear of death in this kitchen,
around midnight, January 27, 1956.** Dr. King received his epiphany after a
threatening phone call. The caller said, ‘We are tired of you and your mess with this

Montgomery Bus Boycott, and if you are not out of this town in three days we are going to blow your house up and blow your brains out.’ +++ And, he went in that kitchen – with fears creeping up on his soul, He went into that kitchen to try to figure out how to get out of Montgomery without appearing to be a coward... But, *something* happened when he started to pray out loud. And then he heard that voice, that inner voice, call him by name: ‘Martin Luther, stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. And, stand up for righteousness.’ +++ Martin Luther King could have hidden in that crowd with everyone else, but he was *such* a man of character, he *couldn’t* say ‘no.’ +++ He had a choice, Martin Luther King originally had a *privileged* life. He didn’t have to do what he did. +++ But he said in his own words: ‘I’m **trying** to do what is *right*. [Sometimes I feel like] I’m losing my courage, but I’m trying to do what is right.’” +++ +++ Now 68 years later, we know that Dr. King *found* his courage. – He went on to provide the vision – the *Dream* – that shaped the Civil Rights Movement – and changed the United States of America forever.

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As Jesus calls the disciples to follow him, – we still haven’t learned his backstory. – We still wouldn’t have had much information to share if someone asked about him on the streets of Jerusalem. ... But he finally breaks that silence to speak his first sentences in this gospel. – Jesus Christ breaks his silence to begin calling disciples; – something he continues doing to this day. +++ **My friends, this morning, Christ calls you to action.** He calls you to find your courage as Dr. King did a generation, and more, ago. He calls you to turn outward and face this world – to listen urgently, for understanding – to recognize vulnerability – to hunger for justice – and to find where you are needed. +++ In Christ’s message, there is no 2 1/5. No 2 99/100. In fact, there’s not even a 1. The urgency is NOW. +++ The present form of the world is passing away. Repent of who you’ve been. Become someone new. +++ +++ Jesus’ *arrival* ushers in the

kingdom of God. +++ ***BUT...*** His first words let us know that his focus is on YOU rather than himself: – what you can learn, – what you can accomplish, – how you can be saved. – +++ “Come... follow me... and I will make you fish for people. ... Do it now – for the time has come.”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.