

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 22, 2006
Mark 1:14-20

“Repent and Believe”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

In checking back in my files, the last time I preached on this weekend was nine years ago. It was Super Bowl Sunday that year and the Green Bay Packers were about to play for the championship. Well, at least we won't have that distraction this year. The texts for this Sunday could lead us in several directions as well. The Gospel lesson relates the call to the apostles Simon and Andrew, James and John. The Old Testament lesson speaks of the sending of Jonah to Ninevah. But perhaps our theme for this day can help direct our meditation on these texts. The theme comes from the words of Jesus in the Gospel lesson, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news." From this simple phrase then we have our theme: "Repent and believe." May the Holy Spirit guide our hearing of the Word this day.

I. Repent

The first word we need to look at in today's Gospel message from Jesus is repent. In the Greek language the word for repent is metanoeo which means to "change your mind". In Hebrew the word for repentance has the meaning of turning around. In a sense that meaning of repentance is seen in the accounts of Jonah and the apostles in our readings.

In the Old Testament Lesson for this morning we have the account of the prophet Jonah. Actually we have just a portion of the book as our lesson. He could not escape the task the Lord had given him to do. He preaches the word of the Lord that judgment will come to the city in 40 days and it will be overturned. In the same way, in the Gospel Jesus preaches repentance as well. After John the Baptist was imprisoned, He went into Galilee preaching the good news and proclaiming: "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Both of these accounts are a reminder that the message of repentance needs to be proclaimed.

And the story of Jonah in its entirety is a reminder that repentance is not a popular message to be proclaimed as well. It is one that even the preacher of repentance at times falters in his courage to present. When the Lord first told Jonah to go to Nineveh he fled in the opposite direction. It took a storm at sea and a three day stay in the belly of a great fish to turn Jonah around and put him on the road to Nineveh to do the job he was supposed to do in the first place. That was literally Jonah's repentance. Even in the Gospel lesson, there is some hint of the opposition to the message of repentance, for Jesus' ministry begins only after John the Baptist is thrown into prison, which took place because John had condemned the adulterous relationship of Herod with his brother Philip's wife.

Now what do you think when you hear the word “repent”. Is it a national repentance you are thinking about? Like the citizens of Nineveh our nation has many things for which it should repent. We are once again within days of the 1971 ruling of Roe v. Wade which legalized abortion throughout the United States. One source I found has calculated that there have been over 42 million abortions in our land since that time. 42 million! And parts of our nation and its political establishment are very intent on making sure that the current status quo on abortion continues. The recent hearings for supreme court justice would certainly show that an influential group of senators are obsessed with the necessity that we keep slaughtering the unborn. Oh, they don’t call it that. They talk about a woman’s right to choose. But the blood of the unborn continues to be shed with impunity and even the smallest attempt to regulate or limit this ungodly practice is met with howls of protest.

But there are many other things for which the call to repentance is necessary as a nation. Our greed, our violence, the immorality which has become a way of life of so many, the decline of the family. We could go on and on. Listen to the word of the prophet Jonah. Hear his warning to Nineveh. It is the warning to every nation and people. Repent.

But repentance is also a personal thing as well. In the Gospel lesson we are told of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as he goes into Galilee to proclaim the good news of God. “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” What a simple sermon that Jesus preached. But how powerfully true. For the Kingdom of God was near. It was personified in fact in the person of Jesus himself. As the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Son of God, he could proclaim the coming of the kingdom. He could set forth the promises of God. And in this sermon, He also called upon people to repent. That is, to turn from their sinful and selfish lives and to hear the words of God. Just as Jonah was sent to Nineveh to preach repentance, so the Lord Jesus in his Galilean ministry also preached repentance and faith.

In the act of calling Simon and Andrew, James and John the Lord also gives us another aspect to the concept of repentance. They are called from their former lives as fishermen to follow him. Their lives are changed forever by their encounter with Jesus. This is symbolic of what should happen to all of us when we hear the word of our Lord, when we hear the good news.

II. Believe

The second word to hear today is “believe”. In that word is the Gospel for today. The words we have heard so far may be seen as hard and difficult words. Stony hearts do not want to be called to repentance. Lives mired in sin often would just as well stay there. But the only hope, the only way out, is found in him who called the disciples today from their nets along the Sea of Galilee. The Lord Jesus in his ministry gives us the way to follow.

The Epiphany season is one continuous reminder of the light of the Lord. He is the true light and we are called by His word to believe, to trust, to put our confidence in Him. Indeed

those first disciples would follow the Lord even though the road would lead to a cross. Yet in that cross would be the victory. The answer to the sins of the world, the nation, our own selves is found in this startling word: "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son cleanses us from all sins". And the promise that will change lives is in that Good News. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Believe it. It seems so simple. But it is a way of life really. If you believe it, it will change you. It will make you a new man or woman. It will redirect your life in service to God and to one another. It cannot be any other way.

What is most interesting in this account in St. Mark's Gospel is the response of Simon and Andrew, James and John. It says of Simon and Andrew: "At once, they left their nets and followed him." Of the sons of Zebedee it is said, "They left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Him." Now it is probable that we do not know the whole story here but it is apparent that these men all know of the great importance of the word of Jesus. They heard him and they followed. They leave what they are doing and obey his voice. They hear his call. And so it is that the Lord begins the task of gathering his disciples for the work they were to do.

And in the life of the church, as His disciples today, we too as we follow must repent and believe.

Then let us follow Christ our Lord
And take the cross appointed
And firmly clinging to His word
In suffering be undaunted
For those who bear the battle's strain
The crown of heavenly life obtain.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.