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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Series B)

January 25, 2015

Text: Mark 1:14–20

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Epiphany season is one of the most necessary times in the Church's liturgical calendar. It helps us stay grounded in the absolute necessities of our Christian faith. Today is certainly no different. If you had to boil down the Lord's teaching into its core message, what do you think you'd find? Thankfully, the Lord Jesus gave it to us. And He preached this core, essential message from the beginning of His earthly ministry. It's found in vs. 15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel." An urgent message about repentance and faith is the core of the Lord's teaching.

Miracles will be performed. Debates will follow. Peoples' lives will change. Sins will be forgiven. Men and women are called to discipleship in which they must deny themselves and follow Christ at all costs.

But it all begins with simple, straightforward preaching about repentance and faith. In Mark 1, we are at the very beginning of our Lord's earthly ministry. No miracles have been performed yet. It is significant to note that Jesus begins His ministry with preaching repentance and faith followed by the gathering of disciples. This is the same pattern of ministry followed by the Church and will continue until Christ comes again. We, the Church, urgently preach repentance and faith in Jesus and call them to follow Jesus.

Most things in the Church are pretty simple. Repentance is that great gift worked in the hearts and minds of people to turn away from their sins; that's what repentance is, turning from sin and embracing the love and righteousness of God in faith and obedience.

Repentance is one of God's greatest gifts. For in repentance, we are given new eyes to see truth, beauty, and goodness. In repentance, we are given new ears to hear the voice of God's love. In repentance, we are given new souls that long for the living presence of our Lord. In repentance, we are made a new creation. For in repentance,

we turn from sin, death, and the devil and find the treasure of all treasures: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Life in Christ's kingdom on this side of eternity is summed up in those simple words preached first by John the Baptist and then by Jesus: repent and believe in the gospel. That message, enlivened and invigorated by the Holy Spirit, then creates disciples who follow Jesus unto eternal life.

For that is what follows next in today's gospel reading. Walking on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees Simon Peter and his brother Andrew casting nets into the water. Mark records one sentence. "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (vs. 17). A few moments later, Jesus sees James and John, the sons of Zebedee and our Lord issues the same call. At once, they all leave their father with the hired servants and follow Jesus. For all four men, the time for repentance, faith, and discipleship has come.

Amazingly, Peter, Andrew, James and John hear Jesus and obey. At once, they drop their nets and follow Jesus. They don't go home and talk things over with their wives. There's no getting things in order. They just hear and obey.

Today is the time to believe the gospel. That's the urgent reality of these last days in which the God's kingdom is at hand. Salvation is closer now than ever before. The kingdom of God is near - so near we can almost reach out and touch it. It's as near as the Christ found in baptismal waters, in communion bread and wine, and inspired words read and proclaimed. God's kingdom is at hand. Today is the day of repentance, faith, and discipleship.

The apostle Paul informs disciples of Jesus how they are to understand their call to faith and discipleship in today's epistle reading. In I Corinthians 7, he writes, "From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, 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 goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away" (7:29-31). We have responsibilities, families, neighbors, and we must tend to them. They are gifts of God and much joy comes through them. But, as disciples of Jesus, we know that we are strangers and pilgrims in this passing world. Our final home lies in the glories of heaven, not here; not in time but in eternity.

Some commentators have tried to soften the Biblical account of the disciples' call to Christ by saying that they must have had some time to get to know Jesus; some prior occasions to hear His teachings and see what's He's like. Is this possible? I suppose but it's a matter of pure speculation. And there's one thing we can't speculate about and that's our call to faith in Christ. Through His holy Word and blessed Sacraments, Christ calls each of us personally to faith today, not tomorrow but right now. God's Holy Spirit lives and abides in our hearts at this moment in time. The promise is that we'll have these forever but we must possess them now, in the present. The kingdom of God is at hand now through faith and trust in the Lord Jesus.

And there's something else lost when try to soft-peddle the disciples' call to follow Christ. And that's the power of Christ's Word. Christ can speak and create faith in the lives of people when and where He pleases even if we think it's impossible. He doesn't need a "getting to know you" period. Jesus is the Lord who creates faith and obedience by the power of His Holy Spirit anointed Words.

Later in his gospel account, Mark records that Jesus heals the sick with simple words: "Be healed" and it's done. To demons, He says, "Be gone" and they leave. To notorious sinners, He says, "You are forgiven" and those mortal stains are wiped away. The same redemptive power is operative in the disciples' call to repentance and faith. Christ speaks and what He says happens.

"Repent and believe in the gospel." That's the message our Lord would have us hear this morning. Hearing this message with faith IS following Jesus. Discipleship in many ways is quite simple. "Repentance and faith." Simple. Yes, but dangerous. It means dying to your own ways and living according to the will of Jesus. "Thy will be done" we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Those are powerful words as the catechism reminds us, "God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature." In a most profound way, we are praying against ourselves, that is, praying against our fallen, sinful nature. Our sinful will is broken but (as the catechism continues to teach us) Christ "strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious will."

Such a word hurts as we are confronted with the reality that we cannot follow our own will and ways. They are too tainted with sin and selfishness to be pleasing to God or beneficial to our neighbors. But this word also encourages us because we know, trust

and believe that this same word spoken by Christ to the saving of our souls will also keep us unto life everlasting. It is after all, Christ's Word.

For this reason and for this reason alone, we can have unfaltering confidence. Christ calls me to faith in the Gospel. Through His Word He calls me to repentance and faith. Your discipleship began with Jesus; it continues today with Jesus; and will remain sure and steadfast throughout eternity with Jesus.

“The kingdom of God is near,” says our Lord. Rejoice and be glad dear brothers and sisters. Your salvation, comfort and eternal joy are here. Christ speaks it. He died and rose again to show you that the Kingdom is indeed near at hand. “Repent and believe in the gospel.” Today is the day of salvation.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.