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

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

January 26, 2014

Text: Matthew 4:12–25

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

Life is marked by turning points: confirmation, graduation, engagement, marriage, children, promotions, etc. Today's gospel reading from Matthew 4:12–25 marks an important turning point in the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus, though it's easy to overlook. Take a look at vs. 12, "When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee."

The man called by God to be the Messiah's forerunner, the one appointed by Divine decree to baptize the Christ, has been arrested by Herod Antipas for preaching the truth of God's Word. John the Baptist's arrest is the turning point for our Lord's ministry in at least two ways:

First, Jesus moves to the northern regions of Israel and chooses Capernaum, a town on the northwestern shores of the Sea of Galilee, as His base of operations. Look at vs. 13-14, "And leaving Nazareth Jesus went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled."

Second, Jesus begins preaching. Vs. 17, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Before this, Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan River and according to Matthew 4:1–11, Jesus had successfully endured the temptations of the Devil in the Judean wilderness. But our Lord hadn't started preaching yet.

Upon hearing of John's arrest, Jesus heads north and begins preaching; it's an important turning point. It's a strange turn of events. A more sensible course of action would have been for Jesus to go south to Jerusalem. That's the heart and center of Israel religious life. The Temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the soul of Judaism beats in Jerusalem. That's the place to begin a world-wide Messianic campaign.

Instead of going south, Jesus goes north; in fact, about as far north as you can go and still be in Israel. The people were poor, uneducated, and spoke with a thick, distinctive accent. To make matter worse, it was filled with Gentiles, non-Jews, who worshipped false idols and followed strange customs. Galilee was known more for revolutionaries, political terrorists, and good fish than it was for being the birth place of religious movements. Capernaum beats out Jerusalem. Go figure.

But Matthew reminds us of a long standing prophecy from the prophet Isaiah, “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned” (vs. 15–16).

The Lord is following the wisdom of Holy Scripture rather than the conventions of human ingenuity. Jesus’ actions are the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. The Lord is the light of divine hope that hadn’t shown in a region held captive to darkness for hundreds of years. In one of the least expected places and at the most unexpected time, God shines His saving light. That’s how God likes to do things. Just think of our own hearts and minds. Through the preaching of Christ’s gospel and the administration of saving sacraments, God the Father shines the light of truth, grace, joy, and peace into your lives. The Holy Spirit lives not in temples made by human hands but in the hearts and minds of people, in you.

That’s an amazing message. God the Holy Trinity doesn’t seek temples and cathedrals of splendor but the humility of human hearts. I know my own sinful heart and I know what the Bible says about the condition of all human hearts. Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matt 15:19). The Lord comes in and takes over residency. He makes us new by shining his redemptive light into our hearts and minds. And by the way, when the Lord took up residency in your life that was the most significant turning point in your life.

And there’s something else that’s kind of odd about Jesus’ actions. He preaches the same message that John did. John’s on the wrong side of Israel’s political and religious life. You might think Jesus would want to reinvent Himself, offer a new brand, be innovative and fresh. Well, I know I’m using modern categories but Jesus picks up where John the Baptist left off, even using the same words according to vs. 17, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Repent is another word for a turning point. Repentance is the daily turning away from sin and evil in heart, mind, and actions and walking in the way of holiness and truth. The time of repentance and faith is now. Today is the day of salvation for Christ's kingdom is present in the power of the Holy Spirit through the reading and preaching of God's Word. Repentance is more significant than all the flashy works of righteousness your heart could ever imagine. The angels and all the host of heaven rejoice over the sinner who repents says the Lord in Luke 15. Repentance is God's gift for us today, tomorrow, until the Last Day. Live in it dear saints, rejoice in these God-given turning points.

Jesus continues His rather strange course by choosing His first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John (vs. 18–22). They're not theologians or priests or wealthy or powerful. Simple, barely educated fishermen with thick Galilean accents make up our Lord's first followers. But they hear a powerful voice saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (vs. 19).

It's an authoritative, powerful call of election and grace. Matthew records no prior meetings between Jesus and these men. There's no interview process, no probationary period to see if they'll make good disciples or to see if Jesus will make a good master. Jesus speaks. His people hear and come to faith. It's God's goodness at work in simple but powerful ways.

Nothing has changed. And that's good news for you and me. We don't need prior qualifications to be Jesus' disciples. Only the gospel call that makes us His reborn, recreated children of grace, life and light. So get rid of those misleading notions that tell us we must have done something to deserve Christ's attention and mercy or that we continue to do something to deserve His love and favor. We didn't and we don't.

So it's all by grace and our hope for today and an eternal future of joy is fixed solidly upon Jesus. That can be a little alarming to most of us. Everything we want and hope for is out of our hands. But we mustn't forget who takes care of these most important things. It's our Lord Jesus Christ who looked Death square in the face, the Lord Jesus who took everything Satan and Hell could give and He beat them all. This He did, not for Himself but for you; that you may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. Your salvation is in Christ's nail-scarred hands, the safest place to be.

There's one last thing we must consider. Again, it shows how strange and unconventional our Lord Jesus is. Vs. 23-25 describes Jesus' healing ministry. Start at vs. 24, "...all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them." Who's coming out to Jesus? The outcasts, the needy, the demonically oppressed, the deranged, and horrors of all horrors, non Jews. Matthew mentions Syrians, Galileans, and people from the Decapolis, a group of ten Gentile cities. They aren't supposed to be included in the promises of God. But here they are receiving God's grace and mercy.

This is the light spoken of by Isaiah the prophet? An unconventional Messiah who preaches and heals in an unlikely place among unlikely people while calling questionable men to be disciples. Yes, that's the Messiah. . And thanks be to God yes. For we are included in this group. And Christ calls you and me, turning us away from the dungeon of evil and shame and brining us to truth, purity, and godly fulfillment. Our Lord's death and resurrection are proof positive that He will never revoke that call to come and follow Him regardless of how backwards, inside out, and crazy life may seem.

Turning points, those significant moments when things change. One such moment for Jesus was the arrest of John the Baptist: preaching began, disciples were called, the restoration of this fallen world is undertaken. That's the significance of this turning point in the Lord's life. The saving grace of Jesus coming to us in Word and Sacrament is one such turning point for us. What a joyful turn of events it is. Glory be to Jesus!

✠ 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.