

3rd Sunday after Epiphany January 26 2020

Matthew 4:12-23

St Peter's Lutheran church Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you who have heard the call from Father God, Brother Jesus, and Friend Holy Spirit. *'From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 'And [Jesus] said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."'* Let's pray:

Today's gospel declares the beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The first words we hear from Jesus as recorded by St Matthew are: "Repent" and "Follow me." They're a perfect blend of command and invitation, setting the pattern for the call to Christian ministry from that moment on. Invitational, yet, irresistible. Largely, Christians understand this, however, it's not always so easy to "Repent" and "Follow", or for that matter, understand. I'll give you an example of what I mean.

People who know me well - especially my old mates, are always interested in how I got from being a rough diamond to a Lutheran pastor, (truthfully, I'm still a rough diamond, with maybe a couple of polished bits) and this is the type of question they will typically ask. A conversation might go something like this:

Half mockingly and half curiously they will say, "Hey Benny [nickname], when did you find Jesus and become a pastor?" "That's a big jump." "Well..." I begin awkwardly, not wanting to offend the genuine part of their interest. And then there's silence. I think hard about how to explain it and start again. "Well..." More silence. Then I say, "You know it's just sort of always been there. I can't remember a time when it wasn't." They ask, "There wasn't a particular day or event?" "Nothing in particular I reckon. It's just always been a part of my life. You know, it's a God thing."

My awkwardness in not being able to provide a succinct and direct response to such questioning, highlights one of the difficulties with today's gospel. It sounds as if one day Jesus shows up and immediately we walk away from our old life and leave everything behind. That's how St Matthew describes it for Peter and Andrew, James and John in today's gospel and I don't doubt that it's true. I know that's how it happens for some people. It's a legitimate and valid experience. But it's not the only way.

Most of you would describe a story similar to mine; a continuous and steady experience of Jesus starting with our parents bringing us before God and the Church for Holy Baptism. Some would tell a story of struggle and wrestling, give and take, back and forth. Think about Jacob or Jonah. In truth, our lives are probably a mixture of all three of those plus others. How does any relationship begin, continue, grow? There is no one way or even a right way. There are probably as many ways of being called, being found by Jesus, whatever you want to call it, as there are people. It is unique and personal to each one of us.

The point, however, isn't how it happened but that it did happen and it continues to happen. It's never a once and for all - finally and forever - kind of thing. Our entire life is a conversion. We're always being converted, shaped, transformed, into the likeness of Jesus. Over and over again Jesus comes to us saying, "Repent" ["Turn"] and "Follow me."

Following Jesus doesn't happen theoretically, but practically, in the context, circumstances, and relationships of our lives. Our relationship with Jesus is grounded and experienced in the people and events of our lives and world. So it was for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We see that throughout the remainder of Matthew's account of the gospel. He not only describes the life and ministry of Jesus but the ongoing shaping and forming of Peter's, Andrew's, James' and John's lives.

That shaping and forming happened in Jesus' teaching of the beatitudes, in his healing of the sick, in his telling parables, in his feeding the 5000, in Peter complaining that they had left everything behind, in James and John arguing with the others and hoping to sit at Jesus' right and left, in Jesus' crucifixion, in his resurrection and ascension, and in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Every one of those moments echo with Jesus' words, "Follow me." Every one of those moments is as much a turning point in the lives of Jesus' first disciples as was the day Jesus first saw them at the Sea of Galilee. Turning points always coincide with the invitation to follow Jesus. They're the intersection of our lives with his life. Isn't that what's happening in today's gospel? We hear it in Jesus' words. He only says two things: "Repent," and "Follow me." They're two sides of the same coin.

So often we hear the word "repentance" and think, "Uh oh, someone's been bad. Someone had better change their evil ways." That's partly the case and sometimes that needs to be the focus, but it also means more than that. Repentance is more than just a moral change. It is a life change, a turning point. We look in a different direction. We see with new eyes. We establish new priorities. We travel a new road.

The turning points of our lives bring us face to face with Jesus and they come in lots of ways. Sometimes they come as we planned, worked, and hoped for. Other times they are completely unexpected and take us by surprise. Sometimes they bring us joy and gladness. Other times we are filled with sorrow and loss. Sometimes they affirm everything we thought and believed. Other times they leave us confused and not knowing what we believe. You've probably experienced all of those and more in the turning points of your own life.

Think about times when, for better or for worse, your life was turned around:

- Moving out and beginning life on your own,
- Falling in love and getting married,
- The birth of your child,
- The death of a loved one,
- Words or actions that hurt someone and forever changed your relationship,
- Graduation from school and beginning your first job,
- The failure of your business or the loss of your job,
- Your divorce,
- A success or accomplishment that was really significant or meaningful,
- Discovering the passion that excites, inflames, and drives your life,
- An anniversary grounded in commitment and deep satisfaction,
- Going to your first AA meeting,
- Your new role as caretaker of your spouse, parent, or sibling,
- A long-time dream that finally came true.

The list could go on and on. There are millions of stories of life's turning points. It seems as if our lives are a series of turning points, some big and others small. Regardless, with each turning point we see ourselves, others, and the world differently, we think differently, we focus on different concerns, we ask different questions, and we move in different directions. What they all have in common, however, is Jesus' commanding invitation, to repent and follow him.

Each turning point comes with the opportunity for and the promise of Christ to refashion, to transform our lives. That's what Jesus did for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. "I will make you...", he says. That's what he does for us as well. He makes us more who we truly are to be. In him we begin to recognise our truest selves.

This doesn't happen in spite of the circumstances of our life, but in and through them. That's where and how it happened for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Their turning point came in sailing the same boats, on the same lake, using the same nets, doing the same work they had done the day before, and the day before that, and the month before that, and the year before that.

So, dearly beloved of our Lord: What are your lakes, boats, nets, and circumstances? What is the turning point you face today? What's happening? What do you see? Somewhere in your life today is a turning point, a place of repentance. Maybe you know exactly what it is. Maybe you've not yet recognised it. Maybe you've closed your eyes to it. Regardless, it is there and so is Jesus, beckoning, calling, longing, desiring. He stands there saying, "Follow me. I've picked you." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.