

3rd Sunday after Epiphany B 21 January 2024

Mark 1:14-20

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus says], 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' Let's pray: ...

One of the hindrances to early Christian mission was the methodology of instructing people in the doctrines of natural religion - the story of creation and so on. Missionaries often waited years to see a single conversion and baptism. What they eventually learned was that people responded better to the story of the last week of Christ's life. The very fact that Jesus suffered and died for sinners and that through him, a sinner might be saved, was more than a story. It was indeed, good news. It struck a chord in people's souls and yielded a plentiful harvest. The lesson learned: Preach Christ crucified and risen.

St Mark the evangelist, begins his story of Jesus' ministry like this: 'Now ... Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God'. Jesus preached the gospel. Jesus preached the gospel; the good news to tax collectors and prostitutes, lepers and the blind, people considered insignificant and unlovable, fishermen mending their nets, people ... just like us. The gospel of God is simply this: In Jesus Christ, sinners are forgiven, wicked people are made holy, blind people can see, lame people can walk, rejected people find acceptance, and insignificant people are proclaimed of great worth.

As Jesus proclaims the good news of God, we see an extraordinary response: people repent of their sins and immediately follow him. What was true of Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, and the whole city of Nineveh, is true for you and me. We hear the good news of Jesus; we believe it's for us personally; we repent, and we follow.

Ever since that day so long ago when Jesus encountered Simon and his brother casting a net into the Sea of Galilee and called them to follow him, people have heard the gospel and been willing to follow Jesus. And there have been some wonderful preachers who have proclaimed the good news with resonant, eloquent voices. St John Chrysostom is considered by many as the finest preacher of all time. His name literally means “golden-mouthed” and he preached with celebrated eloquence in Constantinople around the year 400. Charles Spurgeon is another who comes to mind. He masterfully coupled eloquence and boldness in his preaching to large numbers of Christians at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, where he was pastor for 38 years.

But there’s more to preaching than eloquence. In fact, the most powerful messages are often simple and direct like Jonah’s very brief but effective proclamation to the Ninevites, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown’ (Jonah 3:4)! And the result? – ‘the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth’ [v5]. Jesus preached, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” It's simple, direct, unambiguous, and has changed the lives of Simon and Andrew and James and John and countless people down through the ages to this very day.

Now, please don’t think that preachers don’t need to hear that same preaching. Helmut Thielicke, the renowned Lutheran pastor and theologian rightly states, “The office of the preacher does not stand over against the congregation, but is established in its midst.”

Pastors and preachers offer God’s Word through their messages, but we also need to hear that same word we speak to others. We’re all the same regardless of education or ability, experience or enthusiasm; we remain sinners who need to repent and hear the good news of acceptance and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. We need to hear over and over again about God’s love for us in Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. We need to be reminded that we’re called to repent and believe and follow.

One thing that's noteworthy in today's Gospel, is how busy the disciples were. They were fishermen who had to work hard and long hours to make a living. They weren't Scribes and Pharisees who had the luxury of sitting around debating the finer theological points, with the independence of means to take some time off to go with this new rabbi of Nazareth who was preaching and teaching. The fishermen were mending their nets when Jesus came to them preaching the gospel.

'And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' What happened? They immediately left their nets and followed him. The same with James and John. They immediately left their father in the boat with the hired men and followed Jesus. The word "immediately" is used in both cases. Two things stand out here. Not only were these men flat out, hard at their work, but dropped what they were doing immediately to follow Jesus.

The more I dwell on this, the more convicting it is to me. It seems that for many people, everything takes priority over their call to Christ: work, weather, health, sport, holidays, family, friends, a good TV programme; just about anything and everything before gathering to worship, Bible study, repenting, believing, and following Jesus.

The devil's great deception is that he tries to convince us that we're self-made and don't need God; that we achieve and do quite well in life by our own abilities, wit, cunning, and guidance. This is where pride, foolishness, and stubbornness meet to plot our downfall. The reality is that no-one goes through life without God's presence. The truth is as it has again been set before us today.

Today, this beautiful little girl, Auriella, has been freed from the chains of the devil, washed clean and blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit's presence and faith to follow Jesus. God has called and baptised Auriella to himself, entered her name in the book of life, and promised to be with her to the end of the age. Holy Spirit will guide and teach Auriella about God's love for her, so clearly and profoundly demonstrated by Jesus' life, death, burial, resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of the Father. God will remind Auriella that he created her in God's image and Jesus has made a dwelling-place for her in heaven; her ultimate home. We can only wonder with joy at all that Jesus has in store for Auriella's life. This is the good news for all who are baptised and believe, repent, and follow Jesus.

Even as we age and may one day suffer dementia or some other detrimental loss, I want you to know this: you can be confident in what Christ has already done and continues to do for you. Jesus' call to follow him and the gift of faith allow you to say, "I may forget who I am, but God is the great I AM and God will get me where I once knew I was going." Such is the wonder of Christ's calling through holy baptism.

In Jesus Christ, we have God's good news for us. It's a gospel preached so that we might have new life and eternal life. The good news is proclaimed so that we might know the Lord and know who we are, what we're about, and where we are going.

So, let's drop our nets, hear God's good news, repent, believe and follow Jesus, to the glory of God who loves us all. Amen.

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