

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 27, 2008

Texts: Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

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There is something that used to perplex me when I lived on the western slope of Colorado surrounded by open space and enormous ranches. Houses were strung out along every highway, and each house was brightly lit up all night long with a huge sodium vapor light mounted on a telephone pole. I finally asked a ranching member of the congregation why they needed such huge lights out in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.

It turns out that the light was for security so they could see who was coming down their drive in the middle of the night. It was a security issue. I pondered that for a long time since it seemed to me that because the light was also an invitation to come down the road, a darkened drive would be more effective in keeping people away to begin with. Of course, if there was an accident on the road, the light would be a beacon of hope to a stranded and perhaps injured traveler. But the people I talked to never mentioned that as their reason for having a light in the yard. It still seems to me today that shining a bright light on things in darkness brings both positive and negative results for us and we have to be ready to take it both ways.

When Jesus began his ministry, Matthew's gospel says that it was all about bringing light into darkness. In fact, in order to explain why Jesus had left Nazareth and relocated to Galilee Matthew turned to Isaiah's prophecy regarding God's promise to bring light to the Gentiles of that region who had no knowledge of God and therefore sat in darkness and the shadow of death.

Taking over John's message Jesus came into the region preaching, "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" But instead of reaching out to the Gentiles and shining the light of the gospel on them, Jesus first directed his attention to some Jewish fishermen: Simon, and Andrew, then James and John. Instead of waiting for potential disciples to seek him out as was the custom of the day with itinerant teachers, Jesus spoke directly to the men with the well-known words, "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people*".

Today it is these two familiar utterances of Jesus that invite our contemplation. "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near,* and "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people*". To make sense of the call of the fishermen requires first mulling over the nearness of God's kingdom and Jesus's urgent call to repentance.

The kingdom is near because Jesus has come into the world. Jesus is God's epiphany, God's close approach. One of my cousins, who was raised Catholic but today is something of a footloose wanderer in the world's faiths, once asked me what I thought set Christianity apart most from other religions. At the time (and this was many years ago) I replied that it was the resurrection of Christ, as it revealed the nature of God's power and kingdom.

Now I think I would answer that question differently. God's nearness and power were revealed in the *whole narrative* of Jesus Christ: in his birth into time and history, his baptism when the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him, his startlingly different Galilean ministry, his persistent activity against the power of sin and evil through his teaching and

healing, his crucifixion in weakness and in solidarity with the whole world's suffering, and his resurrection from inevitable death into invincible life.

All these unfathomable things heralding the nearness and power of God set Christianity distinctly apart two thousand years ago, and continue to do so today. Our world is a place where God is expected to stay out of our personal interests; where spiritual teachers should teach only the approved curriculum; where justice isn't necessarily a reasonable expectation; where sin and evil are expected and tolerated; where weak people get crucified in all sorts of ways; and where death means it's over and nothing can be done about it. What Christianity believes, and at its best teaches, rejects all this. As Christians we should frequently find ourselves at cross-purposes with the world's usual business-as-usual.

So I ask myself, *are we really ready for Jesus?* Are we prepared for how the light of Christ illuminates our world and our own lives? And in the face of this question, Jesus's command to repent makes a new kind of sense to me. There is an attention-getting ring to that word "*Repent!*" I bet that at some point every parent in the world has said and every child has heard some variation of that imperative statement, "*When I'm talking to you, I want you to look at me!*" It's a way of shining a bright light on something that wants to be in darkness. Both the child and the parent know that whatever is going to be discussed is going to require a change and it's most likely going to be challenging and uncomfortable for someone. But good in the end.

This is the feeling I get about what it really meant when Jesus urgently preached, "*Repent*" and then said, "*...for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" It's not simply a one-time demand to renounce our bad habits and try to be nicer people. It's a ringing question about our readiness for Jesus and willingness to live in *his* righteousness. It's a spotlight shining on us, pushing back the darkness, urging us to face with a steady spirit whatever is coming down our road.

From this point of view, the unusual calling of the Jewish fishermen looks a little different. Fishing for people was not a new metaphor in Jesus's day. It could mean either judgment or teaching. That day on the shore of the sea of Galilee Simon, Andrew, James and John encountered the nearness and the fullness of the kingdom in the gentle judge and irresistible teacher Jesus. In no time at all, ("*immediately*" as Matthew tells us) they decided to join Jesus in fishing for people.

St. Ignatius of Antioch said, "*Jesus Christ, the Lord, is our true life, and apart from him we are only ghosts, masquerading as human beings lacking substance.*" We'll never know what Jesus said to the Galilean fishermen beyond *repent* and *follow me*, but this story suggests that his teaching or judgment illuminated a lack of substance in their lives and in the presence of Jesus they found themselves made whole. So they followed his light and found their true lives in him.

They may have seemed an obscure choice of evangelists, but a good fisherman knows that with a net *and* a bright light, you catch way more fish. So it's no surprise that in time the work those four fishermen did in Jesus's name (along with assorted other disciples) reached the Gentiles, not only of Galilee, but of the whole world. The light of Christ is still coming into the world, and the net of his just judgment and gracious teaching is still cast on the waters through our faithfulness in living and telling Jesus's good news. *Amen.*