

“Repent, Believe, Fish”

Liturgical Date: Epiphany 3 (B) (This was also Sanctity of Life Sunday)

Primary Text: St. Mark 1:14-20

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Third Sunday after the Epiphany (and also Sanctity of Human Life Sunday), is the Gospel Lesson from St. Mark 1. The title of the sermon is, “Repent, Believe, Fish.” JESUS CALLS PEOPLE TO BE HIS DISCIPLES SO THAT THE GOSPEL TAKES ROOT IN OUR LIVES AND WE FOLLOW HIM IN SHARING HIS MESSAGE WITH OTHERS.

As we will also hear next Sunday, the Gospel of Mark moves very quickly. By verse 14 of the first chapter, Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist, spent 40 days fasting and being tempted in the wilderness, and now we are told that John has been arrested. Jesus comes to Galilee and begins ministering: preaching, healing, casting out demons. And as we heard today, begins to call the 12 Disciples.

It is in verse 15 that the first words spoken by Jesus that are recorded by St. Mark are spoken. *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.”* These words are very significant. As Jesus begins to speak to people during the public phase of ministry, this is His message. It lays out themes that He will speak of often. It gets to the heart of why He was there.

The first part of the verse is a declarative statement. *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.”* The “time” is that the long-promised Messiah, the Christ, is here in Israel. The Jewish people had been waiting, for a long time. Now that time has come. The ancient prophecies will be fulfilled right before their very eyes. The Messiah would not look, or even act, in some of the

ways that they expected. However, those that examined the Scripture carefully would see that Jesus would be and do exactly what YHWH had promised.

“The kingdom of God is at hand.” The Messiah was to bring a Messianic Kingdom. At the time, many were thinking of a political ruler who would raise a powerful army that would expel the occupying Romans from the Holy Land. Instead, they see an itinerant rabbi who would call fishermen and other “regular” people to follow Him. One who would not focus on making trouble for the Romans, but rather tell them that paying taxes to them was the right thing to do. The Kingdom that the Messiah would bring was not a political one that can be located on a map like, such as the United Kingdom ruled by King Charles today. But Jesus was and is King. His kingdom would be “not of this world.” As we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “thy kingdom come.” They were expecting an end to poverty and suffering, but Jesus said, “the poor will always be with you.” Expecting a return to Eden with as Isaiah spoke about leopard lying down with the young goat, the lion and fatten calf together, venomous snakes not harming people. Indeed, these things would come. However, many of these prophecies are fully realized in Jesus’ Second Coming, rather than in His first.

The primary mission of the Messiah in His first coming would be to fulfill the Law that no one could keep perfectly, to take on the sin of the world, to suffer and die, and then rise again in victory over death. His was a mission of eternal salvation, the ultimate good news that is even better than political or social progress. Thus, while the first part of verse 15 is a declarative statement, the second part is a command, “repent ye, and believe the Gospel.”

Repentance. As Martin Luther began the Ninety-Five Theses, *“the entire life of believers is to be one of repentance.”* Repentance is not a one-thing. It is not something that you just do if you feel as if you have done something “really bad.” It is not something that only happens in speaking to a man behind a curtain

who gives you some prayers or other assignments to do. It is certainly a starting point though, as well as a way of life for the Christian. One must realize that they are sinner. One must realize that their sins have condemned them before a holy God and nothing they could ever do could “make up” for that sin. If one does not realize the seriousness of their sin and their helplessness before the perfect God, then why would you need a Savior? Because you would think that you were “already good” or could take care of your sins yourself. But the message of Jesus is that you can’t deal with it yourself, you need Him! You need the forgiveness that He wins and that the Holy Spirit delivers. And then as we go forward in our Christian life, we continue to repent as we will continue to sin.

We repent, which means to turn from our sin. Not a “360” as some have incorrectly stated, because then you end up going the same direction as you were before! Repentance is a “180”. You don’t come back to where you started. You turn, and with the working of the Holy Ghost, head the other direction.

And the second imperative that Jesus gives is to “believe the gospel.” This is the good news. The news that Jesus brings of His Kingdom. A kingdom of grace, forgiveness, faith, and life eternal. This faith is, in itself, a work of God. It is delivered in Word and Sacrament. The very words given to us by Jesus and the Sacraments that God Himself instituted. The bad news is that we are sinners and rightly condemned under God’s Holy Law. But Jesus brings in Himself, the Good News. As I said before, He will take on sin and defeat it. He will take on the wages of sin, death, and defeat it. We share in that victory when we believe the Gospel, when we have faith. We believe that Jesus died and rose again for us. To re-emphasize, this is the message of Jesus. It is the message that we heard Him speak in the text this morning, continues throughout His earthly ministry, and still speaks to a lost and dying world today: “Repent and believe”.

And the text for today does continue. As Jesus walked on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, He comes across Simon (who will become better known as Peter) and his brother Andrew. They are fishermen casting their nets. Jesus speaks directly to them and calls them to be His disciples. They “straightway” as the King James puts it, immediately drop their nets and begin following Jesus. The three now go a little further and see another fishing boat containing James, his brother John, their father Zebedee and the employees that worked in their fishing business. Jesus calls them too. And what did they do? They drop everything and just leave their dad and the other worker to follow Jesus. Again, notice the quick action that is taking place here. They didn’t say, “Let’s think about this. We have to run some background and draw up a list a pros and cons to this. I mean, this is a big life change for us. Our business is doing well, and this sounds risky.” No, they drop their nets, leave it all behind and follow Jesus.

When God calls us, it is Him that works repentance and faith. However, as human beings with a self-will (free will) we can refuse the call. People can reject the message of Jesus, and unfortunately many do. The desire of God is that we will not do that. The Messiah is here. The Kingdom is here. Repent and believe.

And we notice that this involves action. We don’t just nod in agreement, check of a “religion” box, or get some membership card to bury in our wallets or purses and then go on doing what we were doing before. This is a “180”. Being obedient to and following Jesus requires, well, actually following Him!

And this being Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, we have witnessed this in our country related to the issue of abortion and life. Those of us who believe that life begins at conception were pleased when in June of 2022 *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision. Many have prayed long and hard for there to be an opportunity to protect the life of the unborn by law. However, what has happened since? In most cases where

votes have taken place, states have not voted to restrict access to abortion nor to protect life in the womb. There must be more hearts and minds changed. We can't just say, "court case overturned, check" and then not continue to advocate for God's gift of life. Just as we can't say, "repent, believe, check" and then sit on our hands.

I skipped over verse 17 where it records what Jesus said to Simon Peter and Andrew. At this point, I want to return to that verse to bring in the third word of the sermon title: fish. This is the action part. This is what Jesus wants His disciples, His followers, to do. *"And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men."* They would still be fishing, but not for animals, but for people. They would embark on a ministry to spread the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus. They would eventually go to many parts of the world when they become the Apostles (the "sent ones") after the Resurrection and Ascension. Oh, but we can come up with so many excuses as to why we can't "fish for men", that is to share the Gospel, can't we?

A story is told of mountain lake where many people would come to fish. One particular fisherman, we will call him Bubba, always was very successful. People were astounded as he returned from each day's fishing trip with a massive number of fish, some of them quite large. The game warden began to become suspicious. Maybe something "fishy" was going on. Especially because whenever Bubba was out fishing you could large sounds of "boom." The game warden asked Bubba if he could accompany him on one of his fishing trips because he wanted to see how he was always so successful. Bubba said, "sure, Mr. Warden."

The next day they headed out in Bubba's boat upon the lake. After a little while, Bubba stopped the boat, and to the shock of the game warden, pulled out a stick of dynamite, lit it, and then threw it in the lake. "Boom!" And it wasn't long before Bubba began gathering all the dead fish that had floated to the top of the

water. The game warden said, “You know you shouldn’t be doing that. That is not how you are allowed to fish.” Undeterred, Bubba moved the boat to another spot in the lake and repeated the same process. The warden is more direct this time. “You can’t do that! It is illegal to fish using dynamite. You can be fined or even arrested for these actions!” Bubba just smiled, pulled out another stick of dynamite, and lit the fuse. He then handed to the lit stick of dynamite to the game warden and said, “Look Mr. Warden. Are you going to talk? Or are you going to fish!?”

So, I ask you that this morning, “are you going to talk about how the fishing should be done or not done, or are you going to fish?” We Christians often like to talk about witnessing to others about Christ, but don’t actually do it enough. We will take classes on evangelism and hear about it in sermons, but when it comes time to actually do it we come up lacking. Of course, we must speak to share the Gospel. But we also must go. We must go to the fish and be intentional.

Jesus has given us all the equipment that we need. He has given us the message to share. First and foremost, He has made us His people, His children. He has brought us to repentance. He has given us faith. And then, like Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John we are to follow Him and get busy fishing!

Amen.