

**The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 22, 2015, Year A
St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL**

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:4-12
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

This is the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, when he begins to teach, preach, and heal the sick to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Prior to this, Matthew has been telling us who Jesus is by presenting his genealogy, the account of his birth and the visit of the Magi, the escape to Egypt and the return to Nazareth, his baptism in the Jordan by John, and his temptation in the desert.

Matthew has described the complex nature of who Jesus is. He has described him in human terms by giving us the family tree, and he has described him in spiritual terms by recounting the epiphany of our Lord in the three persons of the Trinity, all present at Jesus’ baptism. Matthew has portrayed Jesus as a king by describing the way in which the Magi sought him and worshipped him at his birth, and he has shown us that Jesus was subject to all the temptations plaguing common people as he describes how Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert.

In the first three and a half chapters of his gospel, Matthew tells us that Jesus is fully human yet fully God, that he is a king, yet able to identify with the common people. In today’s reading, he tells us how Jesus begins his ministry.

There are two things that jump out at us immediately. The first is where Jesus is. Matthew tells us that “When he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea.”

This is Gentile country. In those days, Capernaum was a fairly large city located on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee about twenty miles from Nazareth. It was a place that was predominantly Gentile in population and culture, and there was a large Roman garrison there. According to the Jews, it was technically located in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the twelve tribes of Israel who had been given lands in this area when the people of Israel returned from their captivity in Egypt under the leadership of Moses and then Joshua. But that was a long time before Jesus came, and Greek and Roman cultural influences now prevailed.

Matthew implies that Jesus’ decision to go to Capernaum was influenced by the news that John the Baptist had been arrested. From a human perspective, this might seem to be a wise move for Jesus as he prepared to begin his ministry. Herod was exerting pressure on religious activity outside the mainstream of Judaism, so it is reasonable to assume that Jesus would be a target for arrest also if he began to preach, teach and heal in Herod’s territory.

Matthew also tells us that Jesus went to Capernaum for a spiritual reason, so, as the Word tells us, “that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘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.’”

This Scripture Jesus quoted was from the passage in Isaiah that we heard read this morning in the first lesson. The Greek text in the gospel is translated as “Galilee of the Gentiles” while the text from Isaiah, written originally in Hebrew, is translated “Galilee of the nations.” Different translations for different contexts, different audiences, but the same meaning, and that meaning is important to us: that God’s plan of salvation is for everyone – for all nations, for all ethnic groups, or in the Jewish setting of the day for both Jews and Gentiles, or in other words, for everyone.

Again we see the theme of mission. The season of Epiphany is about mission. Jesus began his ministry on a mission trip. He left home in Nazareth and went to the big city, to Capernaum, to begin his work among us, the Gentiles. He ministered to his own people, the Jews, as well, but he intentionally went outside of his personal sphere and space to minister to others on quite a few occasions.

Translating this into current thinking and practice, the Good News is not just for those of us in the Church; it is for everyone. And consider this: while we now know that Jesus was and is God, the people he ministered among, especially in the early days of his ministry, didn’t know that. To them, Jesus was just another person with something interesting to say and consider, someone who seemed to care about others, and someone who talked about the things of God in a way that could make their lives better.

You and I can do that. Mission is about being the child of God that we already are and talking to someone about it. We see Jesus performing miracles to witness the hand of God at work. They sound almost like a magic show to us today – turning water into wine, walking on water, even raising the dead. But God is still in the miracle business, and he can and will perform miracles through us, his children.

When we walk with someone who has experienced tragedy or hurt, and we show them the love of God in our actions as well as our words, perhaps spoken as prayers or words of comfort and demonstrated through a ministry of presence, taking time to listen and loving someone through pain and into healing – when we do these things, we are allowing God to work miracles through us, right here and right now. Miracles today sound like, “I can’t believe they actually fixed their relationship and got back together; it’s amazing to me that (whatever);” or “that’s incredible.” We say these things when we experience something out of the ordinary or the expected. God is with us and close to us more than our culture is often willing to recognize.

The second thing to note in this passage is the message itself: Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Jesus did not start out with some nice easy talk about the love of God, or do some healings as a warm up to get people interested in listening to him.

No, his first word as he began his ministry was “repent!” “Make a U-turn in your life. Fix what is wrong in your thoughts and deeds and turn back to God.” It’s not that he didn’t think much of what people might think or how they might feel. It’s really quite the opposite. He thought so much of them, and us, that he died for us all. He told them what they really needed to hear, not

what they might have wanted to hear. And how do we know they didn't want to hear his message? Three years later, they crucified him for it!

There is a social more in our culture that says religion and politics do not make for good dinner conversation. But it is far too easy to take that thought and apply it to all of life – that people don't want to hear about our views on religion because it is inappropriate to push our understanding of God onto someone else; after all, we hear, it's a private matter.

This is an important concept to grab hold of – that the Good News of Jesus Christ is central to everything that we are. It defines us. We are children of the living God, not just members of some organization called a church. The Good News we have to share is good news indeed, and it is meant to be shared with everyone, whether our culture thinks it is appropriate or not.

The gospel message we heard read this morning tells us what Jesus did as he started his ministry. He went to people who did not know God and he made him known to them. He called them out of sin and darkness into his marvelous light. He called them to repent and believe.

In the Great Commission, he left us instructions to go out and do the same thing. We are to *transform lives by delivering the unchanging message of Jesus Christ to a changing world*. We are to proclaim the Good News just as Jesus himself did; just as Andrew did in last week's gospel reading when he ran to tell Peter that he had found the Messiah, the Christ; just as missionaries throughout the world and throughout the Christian Age have done in places near and far, and just as someone did for you at whatever age you came to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, whether a parent or a Sunday School teacher or a friend. We have received an amazing gift, the gift of eternal life, and it is our privilege to pass it on.

So “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

And now unto you, O Lord, be ascribed all might, majesty, power and dominion. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.