

Epiphany 3

Mark 1:14-20

January 21, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Jesus is Calling You to Follow Him!

He has a message for you

He has work for you

And so it begins. Last Sunday, Jesus stepped forward to be baptized by John, announcing the beginning of his public ministry. The very first words that St. Mark records Jesus saying are (:15), “**The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!**” Mark does not tell us about any crowd. Not even his disciples are nearby. These words are really a summary of everything Jesus taught during his ministry. They are an announcement to the world, to you, to me. Through these words this morning, we are reminded that Jesus is calling you to follow him.

He has a message for you

“**The time has come,**” After thousands of years of planning and preparation, the Old Testament era was over. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection would bring about a whole new era in the history of the world. “**The kingdom of God has come near.**” When we pray, “Your kingdom come,” in the Lord’s Prayer, we are not praying for a physical place that you can find on a map, like the modern-day Israel and in a war with the Hamas now. That Israel has nothing to do with anything in the Bible. Many think that God’s kingdom is heaven, which is a good guess. Really, God’s kingdom is his ruling activity in our hearts. Whoever has faith in Jesus is a citizen of God’s kingdom. Just because someone is a nice person who does nice things for others does not mean he is a member of God’s kingdom or that he’s going to heaven. It’s all about faith, or trust in the heart.

Jesus emphatically says, “**Repent.**” A more literalistic translation would be, “You need to repent right now and do not ever stop repenting.” To repent means to change directions because you’re going the wrong way. A few winters ago, in a parking lot, I hit a patch of ice with my car. I slid a bit and bumped into the curb. No big deal, I thought. As soon as I got on the main road though, I noticed that the car kept drifting to the left. I had to keep steering it to the right or I would have crossed over the center line. When I bumped that curb, the tire alignment got messed up. Obviously, I got that fixed as soon as I could at my favorite service station.

All of us come into this world out of alignment. From our parents, we inherit a sinful nature. We are sinful even before we are born. We are instinctively drawn toward sin. We are sucked in by temptations. We look at our lives and we feel frustrated that we aren’t better. We don’t meet our own standards let alone God’s. We sin, which is anything that does not line up with God’s perfect directions for how life should be lived, which is summarized in the 10 Commandments, not the 10 Suggestions. How would you like it if others could see and hear everything you do all day? Maybe some complaining, as if God hasn’t blessed us enough? Maybe some cursing or swearing or dirty language when something doesn’t go the way you want? Maybe staring at a screen so much that you waste time. (How many times do I need to check my email each day anyway? Or how many hours do we need to watch TV?) Maybe we use our screens to watch dirty things that would make our grandmother blush? Maybe we are only focused on what we want instead of actively seeking what we can do to help others. Maybe spending extra money on yourself (not an automatic sin), but not ever giving God an extra gift. I could go on. I haven’t even mentioned our egos yet.

One of the devil’s greatest ploys is to get us to ignore Jesus’s direction to repent. The words roll out of our mouths, “**Holy God, gracious Father, I am sinful by nature and have sinned against you in my thoughts, words, and actions.**” without any serious thought. “I know. I know. I’m a sinner, but Jesus forgives me. Same old. Same old. Boring.” The devil wants us to get blasé about sin. “I’m not perfect but I haven’t done anything really bad.

Jesus has a message he wants you to hear. He tells us, “Repent and...and what? Repent and don’t ever sin again? Try harder? Repent and take a 10-step program to improve your life?” No! Jesus says, “Repent and believe. Believe what? Believe that the Easter Bunny is coming and will make everything better? Believe that you aren’t such a bad sinner after all? Believe that if you promise never to commit that sin again or at least you have good intentions not to, you’ll be OK with God?” No! He says, “Repent and believe the good news!” Trust the good news that the Savior, the One anointed by God to accomplish your salvation has come. Trust that Jesus took the punishment that you and I deserved for our sins as he hung on the cross. Trust his proclamation that “It is finished.” Trust that your sins are forgiven and your guilt is gone. Trust that he physically rose from the dead and therefore you will too.

I stumbled upon this quote this week, “Jesus Christ knows the worst about you. Nonetheless, he is the one who loves you the most.” The only reason that you and I are a part of God’s kingdom is because he came to you and called you to follow him. Left to ourselves we would fight against him for all eternity. But he changed you from the inside out. A pastor friend of mine recently shared how a woman who struggled with the sins of drug and alcohol abuse stopped by his office just to say what a difference Jesus made in her life. She said that although she still struggled with guilt and with the feeling that God was angry with her, she knew that it was not rue. She said, “I feel like the knots of guilt inside of my heart have unloosed.” She smiled and said, “I’m not afraid anymore.” That’s God’s message to you. You do not need to be afraid. You are saved. Not only does Jesus have a message of salvation for you, he also has a mission for you.

He has a mission for you

Mark then tells us that Jesus called Simon (Peter), Andrew, James and John to be his full-time disciples. All four of them were fishermen. Jesus told them that he would use them to “fish” for people. Back then, fishermen would toss a large circular net with weights attached to the outer edges of the net into the water. The edges of the net would sink, capturing whatever was below it. In the same way, as the disciples tossed God’s Word to a dying world, it would capture some souls. Those first disciples shared God’s Word through which the Lord called many people to follow him in faith. Then that generation shared God’s Word with the one after it all the way through centuries, cultures and continents until you now have God’s Word right here, right now. Jesus has a mission for you. He wants you to share that word with others.

Certainly, are not qualified to represent God to the world. We do not deserve to be an ambassador for the high and holy Ruler of the universe. Peter, Andrew, James and John didn’t deserve to represent God either. Neither did Noah, who got drunk, or Moses was a murderer, or David who was an adulterer and a murderer, or Jonah who ran from God, and countless others. Not only did God bring all of those people into his kingdom, but he used them in his kingdom to share the message of salvation with others. Now, he’s going to use you.

Sharing the message of salvation is not going to be easy. First of all, there is an internal struggle because our sinful nature does not want to talk about religion with others. Also, St. Mark reminds us that John, who baptized Jesus, was put in prison. Who wants to get thrown in prison?

John was finally executed as were countless other faithful souls who held on to Jesus even though they were arrested and fed to lions or killed in some other way.

There is still serious opposition to the gospel today. Amazon Prime just announced a new show called “Hazbin Hotel” about the daughter of Satan. Satan is described as a dreamer with fantastical ideas for all of creation, but sadly was perceived as a trouble maker. In other words, Satan is the good guy. On January 12, singer/rapper Lil Nas X released a new song called “J Christ.” Pictures promoting the song and the music video show the singer hanging on a cross. That’s the kind of world we live in these days.

Only the power of God’s Word could have moved those first disciples to give up their somewhat steady lifestyle as fishermen in order to follow Jesus. Out of the 12 disciples, only John was not executed for his faith, and he was arrested and imprisoned for years. Only the power of God’s Word is going to give you the strength and courage to follow Jesus and carry out his mission.

Your prayers for me, for this ministry, for the missionaries we read about in Forward in Christ are important, and something that all of us can do. Your offerings are also an important way of carrying out the mission Jesus has for us. Talk to your friends, relatives and neighbors, children and grandchildren. Ask them questions. Listen to their answers. Then share your faith. For example, when shoveling snow, I could mention to my neighbor that my uncle died while shoveling snow. Then I could ask, “What do you think happens to you when you die?” No matter how he replies, I can say, “The Bible tells me that because Jesus died and rose for me, death on this earth is just a doorway to eternal happiness in heaven.” That’s casting another net.

No matter what your situation in life or how you are feeling, or what others think about you or how they treat you, you can smile each day knowing that in absolute grace, God called you into his kingdom. You are saved. You are going to heaven. And until you get there, you have the amazing opportunity to tell others about Jesus. Praise and thank Jesus that he called you to follow him. Amen.