

Matthew 4:17-22
January 16, 2011

South Plains

Repent, Follow, then Believe

When I started thinking about this sermon, the topic was evangelism, sharing the gospel in 2011. But the events in Tucson, Arizona, kept seeping into my head the way this winter cold keeps finding ways to get inside my house. Eventually, I decided to attend first to that cold wind and come back to evangelism later. Since the bulletin was already printed and much of the biblical study was already done, I thought perhaps this is the Holy Spirit's way of blowing open a window in my mind in order to help me see what Jesus is saying in this text, not only to Peter and Andrew long ago, but also to us today as we come to grips with terrible losses in Tucson.

The setting is important. You may remember that according to Matthew, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt in order to escape the cruel and jealous King Herod. When they returned to Israel, they settled in Nazareth. Thus, our Lord is identified by his contemporaries as Jesus of Nazareth. He does not remain in Nazareth. After John is arrested, Jesus makes his home in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. This move turns out to be significant for several reasons. Some of his closest disciples will be fishermen. The setting fits with the prophecy from Isaiah 9 that we read every Advent: "Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." And, most telling for our purposes, Jesus begins his

ministry not in the heart of Judaism where the law and the prophets would have been uppermost in everyone's mind. No, Jesus begins in Galilee of the Gentiles, a region where the population of people of God had been diluted, and their faith had been secularized by the presence of other religions. In other words, Jesus begins in a place like Albemarle County where we cannot take Christianity for granted.

Indeed, there are few places in the United States where Christian values and behaviors can be taken for granted. We have to win the right to be heard and taken seriously. In this setting, Matthew says, "Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' "

"Repent!" that's has been the message heard for two weeks from the President and other politicians as well as from the commentators. We need to be more civil in our debates, more respectful of our opponents, more careful with the symbols and words we use in our campaigns. I suspect that most of us agree that invoking the images of warfare and violence in order to score political points only debases democracy. Truth gets lost because when our priority is to win at any cost, we cannot follow the truth wherever it may lead, to quote Thomas Jefferson. We need to repent.

Repentance, however, is only the beginning of Jesus' message. "Repent," not for the sake of civility or good manners, or even for the sake of democracy.

“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Another politician reminded his campaign that, “Judgment Day is more important than election day. It’s more important to do what’s right than what’s easy.” When we speak with the knowledge that God is listening, when we act with God watching what we do, when we choose our political positions and vote our conscience in the light of divine judgment, we can develop the habits of kindness and truth. That kind of deep repentance happens only when the nearness of God presses upon us with the majesty of ocean waves breaking against a seawall at our feet, or with the rumble of thunder shaking the house where we have sought shelter from the storm.

That message shook the people around the Sea of Galilee when they heard Jesus, including two fishermen. What else could have prompted Andrew and Peter, James and John to drop their nets in the middle of a work day and fall in behind Jesus? It’s fun to speculate what personal magnetism Jesus radiated when he smiled at sinners and argued with the Pharisees. I find myself wondering whether I would have had the openness to see him as Savior; whether I would have had the courage to follow. We all need a leader we can believe in.

Scripture has little interest, however, in portraying Jesus as a celebrity, famous for being famous, loved for being good-looking, influential because everybody knew him. Matthew’s story takes special care to tell us that the time was ripe for the gospel. Scripture was fulfilled. The Holy Spirit was active. Most important of all, Jesus was

doing what God wanted. He was obedient. The kingdom of heaven had already come near. In other words, Jesus himself was following the path God laid out. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Just as Jesus was the right man for God’s time, I believe the church of Jesus Christ, we who count ourselves as Christians, have a distinct and critical role to play in our own time. Tragedies such as the shooting in Tucson remind us of the limits to human existence. Our words make a difference, but they do not control the course of human events. Healthcare policies and technologies are important, laws are helpful, but nothing we do can make us live forever. We live by the grace of God.

Repentance, any significant change in our lives, requires more than rhetoric to make a difference. We must also follow. We have to get up out of the chair, out of the pew, maybe even get out of the boat where we’ve been making a living or enjoying life. Jesus invites us to follow him.

Peter and Andrew left their nets. James and John left their boat and their father Zebedee. Repentance means leaving some things, even leaving some people behind in order to leave room for new things and time for new people. Maybe the fishermen kept their hand in fishing. At the end of John’s gospel, they are back with their nets. But, the pattern of their old lives was broken; a new life had begun with Jesus.

The church of Jesus Christ can make a difference in the life of our community and nation going forward in several ways. First, we need to keep raising awareness of the kingdom of God. We do this with public worship every Sunday. This is not a secret or closed meeting. In fact we take pains to make visitors welcome. A culture of hospitality is exactly the culture we are nurturing here in worship, and also wherever we live and work. Indeed, by advertising South Plains we intend to tell the world that God is present.

More important than advertising in the papers is “word of mouth publicity.” I do not suggest you walk along the shores of Lake Monticello and proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Nevertheless, it is appropriate and timely to stick our two cents in the conversation around the water cooler or at the clubhouse. For instance, one might say, “We need to pray not only for the victims, but also for Jared Loughner because Jesus says to pray for our enemies.” Or, we could say, “This is a wake up call for Christians and people of faith to reach out and help each other.” Or simply to say, “God is grieving too.”

Second, Christians have ready-made values that can infuse political discussion both with kindness and with righteousness. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is a rule that promotes civility. And the bedrock concern for righteousness in the Bible tells us that our highest goal is not civility or even prosperity alone, but prosperity that cares for the weak and vulnerable, the widows and

orphans. There can never be a Christian party in politics. But there can and should be biblical values of righteousness that guide our laws. That means that Christians have to get our hands dirty by speaking and working for the common good.

Third, and perhaps most movingly right now, the example of Jesus’ ministry encourages us to care for troubled people like Jared Loughner. Think of the many times Jesus is casting out evil spirits. It is always tempting and safer to ignore the mentally ill. There’s no need to blame anyone for failing to help Jared Loughner. Perhaps no law or further intervention could have prevented the shooting. But, his condition reminds us forcibly of the 26,000 people in Charlottesville and the four surrounding counties who have mental illnesses. That’s a lot of people in our service area. They need care and medication which require money. They are a significant proportion of the homeless. More than anything else, the mentally ill need compassion. Almost all of them are not dangerous to themselves or others. The followers of Jesus, the healer, can lead the way in learning how to support and befriend and care for those with mental illness.

Any ministry of evangelism starts by looking within ourselves to identify those places in our own hearts that need repentance in order to follow Jesus more closely. The kingdom of heaven comes nearer when we talk about God’s presence and proclaim heaven’s values. But, it come closest of all when we reach out to others in

imitation of the love Jesus showed to all persons, especially the mentally ill. “Repent,” says Jesus, “repent and follow me.” That’s our calling.