**Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church**

**Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Third Sunday After Epiphany**

**January 24, 2021**

**Mark 1:14-20**

**Sermon by Reverend Nilo Figur**

We are living in strange, turbulent, and even scary times – here and around the world. The events of the last weeks, especially those in Washington, D.C., created feelings of anxiety, sadness, and fear, adding to the uncertainty already caused by a worldwide pandemic. There may be questions like, where is God, our God, in the midst of all of this?

There is a special message for you and for me in the Gospel’s reading for today: “*Repent and believe in the Gospel – follow me, and I will make you fishers of men!”* These three profound imperative verbs used by Jesus – repent, believe, and follow – may not resonate especially well in our society today, yet the voice and call of Jesus continues to be loud, clear, and powerful: Repent! Believe! Follow me!

The Gospel for this Sunday points to the transition from John the Baptist to Jesus, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, who proclaimed 700 years earlier: *“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Preparethe way of the Lord, make his paths straight”* (Mark 1: 2,3).John, *“the voice of one crying in the wilderness,”* prepared the way of the Lord with a strong and radical message: *“Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”* The prophecies about the King of heaven, about the promised Messiah, were being fulfilled right there, in Jesus.

It is important to note that the word “repentance” – in the original Greek form that John used (*metanoya*) – means much more than being sorry! It relates to a profound, radical change – a turning to another direction and affecting the values and purpose of life – through the power of God’s word. In the Gospel reading for today, Saint Mark says that after John was arrested*, “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God, saying: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”*

The time was being fulfilled, as Paul later writes to the Galatians: *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”* (4:4,5). We just celebrated that at Christmas. When John finishes his task of *“preparing the way of the Lord,”* Jesus starts His ministry with a similar message of repentance that John was preaching, using the same Greek word for repentance (*metanoya*).

By fulfilling the prophecies, Jesus is fulfilling God’s promises of salvation, saying, *“the kingdom of God is at hand!”* And he adds something new and very important – *“believe in the Gospel.”* As you know, the Gospel means the grace and love of God, offered to all who repent and believe in Jesus, who offers forgiveness and eternal life in His Kingdom. It is good to remind and reaffirm our clear understanding about the meaning of the grace of God.

We have the Gospel, and we know the grace and love of God in Christ. Prior to that, we were disconnected from Christ, from God, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, *“you were dead in your transgressions and sins, following the course of this world… by nature deserving of wrath… at that time you were separate from Christ… without hope and without God in the world… you followed the ways of this world… gratifying the cravings of your flesh and following its desires and thoughts”* (2:1,3; 2:2,12).

Knowing and believing the Gospel means recognizing our sinful nature, which is always trying to take us apart from God and His will. There is only one place to find forgiveness and God’s mercy, which is on the cross, where Jesus suffered and died for our sins. This is where God’s grace and love is for all of us! Luther said: *“Once we have His Word, true doctrine, and true worship, we also pray that His kingdom may be in us; that He may govern us in this doctrine and life, that He may protect and preserve us against all the power of the devil and his kingdom, so that alone may remain”* (AE 21:146). We have His Word; we have His true doctrine and worship, so we pray that His kingdom may be in us! That is what we ask in the Lord’s Prayer: *“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!”*

Believing in the Gospel means being transformed by the power of God’s Word into a new creature, a new person, with a new view of the world, and living the perspective of eternal life in Christ. Paul wrote to the Romans: *“For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,”* (1:6). The Gospel is the power of God for salvation, and Jesus started His ministry proclaiming, *“repent, and believe in the Gospel!”*

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus calls his first disciples, Simon, Andrew, James, and John, who were fishermen, saying*, “follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men,”* and they immediately left their nets and followed him. What an impressive and radical attitude of those disciples, leaving everything behind, and following Jesus! At that time, a person had to be chosen by a master to become a disciple. With Jesus, it is the opposite – He chooses His disciples! He says, *“follow me!”* And the same happens with you and me! God, in His grace, calls us into His kingdom by the power of the Gospel. Luther explains this in the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed, saying: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps me in the true faith.”

What a blessing it is to be a disciple of Jesus – to follow Him! But then we face the reality and challenges of living the faith as disciples, to follow Jesus during this time of COVID and through all that is going on here and around the world. We may ask, is this the right time to follow Jesus, to share and preach the Gospel for repentance, forgiveness, and life? Yes, it is! There is a parallel here with the Old Testament reading for today! In the text before today’s reading, God sent Jonah to Nineveh, that great city, to preach repentance and save its people. Jonah did not like that call and tried to escape from it, going in the opposite direction, but it didn’t work, and he ended up in the belly of a great fish and thrown onto the shores of Nineveh! God had a plan to save the people of Nineveh! And He did just that, despite Jonah’s attempt to avoid it!

Where is your Nineveh? Today Jesus is calling you with the same imperative, *“follow me!”* When called by Jesus to follow Him, the disciples *“immediately left their nets and followed him.”* Their lives were completely changed…forever! We are blessed today, being reached and transformed by the Gospel, because of that response of the disciples to Jesus’ call! Their witness was so real, so powerful, that crossed continents, through centuries, coming and reaching us today.

Today, our Nineveh is here where we live, surrounded by people who are suffering in silence, stressed, desperate, and confused. They are living in despair and misguided by so many voices, most of which are pointing in the wrong direction! Your Nineveh is closer than you think! Look into your neighborhood, among your co-workers, your friends, and even among family members. Jesus’ *“follow me”* call is a response to a great need of God’s healing message of hope and salvation, in your Nineveh.

No matter who you are or how you are doing in life, you can be sure that Jesus is present with His forgiveness and grace, through His Word and Sacraments, strengthening you to reach a confused and unstable Nineveh with your witness. The imperative *“follow me”* is not a call of enforced law, but a call of grace, of mercy, of forgiveness, and of eternal life. It is a call to be followed and witnessed! Let us leave our human sinful nature nets behind and follow Jesus, and being a part of His great living net. Let us be His fishermen, catching people of our Nineveh for life – for eternal life! I am inviting you to leave today with a grateful, joyful heart, thinking about how you can answer Jesus’ call to follow Him, to be a part of His great living net, to catch people for life – for eternal life! Amen.

*No eyes have seen no ear has heard, no mind has conceived,*

*what God has prepared for those who love him* ( 1 Cor 2:9). Amen.

Nilo Figur