

Sunday, January 21, 2018
Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)
Jonah 3.1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7.29-31; Mark 1.14-20
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Okay. So let's get this straight. Jesus is in Galilee, proclaiming the Good News. The gist of his message is "the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." As he's walking along the Sea of Galilee, he comes across two brothers – Simon Peter and Andrew. They're hard at work, fishing. By all indications, these men have never met. Jesus doesn't know them from Adam. (And if anyone would know Adam, it would be Jesus.) And out of the blue, he calls out to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mk 1.17). Not even knowing who this is, these brothers immediately drop what they are doing and follow him. And then it happens a second time. Jesus comes across another set of brothers – James and John. Again, no indication that they knew each other or had ever met. Jesus does the same thing. He calls out to them to follow him. And again, these brothers leave their nets, their boat, and their father, to follow Jesus.

Seems a little odd, don't you think? Like someone would drop whatever they're doing, quit their job, upend their entire life, leave their family, and go off to follow some guy they've never met. Would you do that? To give up everything to follow some stranger? In our own time, we would certainly consider such a thing irresponsible. Even crazy. Possibly even dangerous.

Yet, there was something about his man, this Jesus, that captivated Peter and Andrew, James and John. There was something about his message proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God, his message of repentance, that spoke to them on some deeper level. There was something that touched the core of their being and made them want to give up all they had, to change their lives forever, just to be with this man, to learn from him, to share in whatever it was that he was offering. To share what he was promising.

Part of what may sound odd to us is the whole repentance thing. In the sandals of the two sets of brothers, hearing some stranger telling us that we need to repent, even if it is because the kingdom of God is near, might be off-putting. The need to repent implies that we have done something wrong that requires repentance. That we have sinned in some way. Okay, yes, we know that we are all sinners. But we certainly don't need someone telling us that. Particularly some stranger we have never met. But for the two sets of brothers, there was even more to it than that.

We think of repentance as being an action of sincere regret or remorse. That is the dictionary definition of repentance. And Jesus certainly was talking about regret and remorse in the face of our sins. But the word he used carried a greater meaning. The Greek word used in the Gospel, which we translate as repentance, is *metanoia*. This word actually means to turn around. Specifically, a transformative change of heart as a result of a spiritual conversion. A changing of one's way of life in response to a spiritual conversion. That they were to turn away from their sinful, selfish lives and turn toward God. That they were to reorient their whole self, becoming God-centered instead of self-centered. This was the message that Jesus preached.

The need to turn their lives around so that they could participate in and receive the blessings of the kingdom of God. In the process, they would have a new profession, a new identity. That of followers of Christ.

The very term “kingdom of God” implies transformation. In the New Testament, the term often translated as “kingdom of God” is a complex one. It is not just a reference to either the church or to the afterlife. Rather, it is a reference to a life wholly transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was the message that Peter, Andrew, James, and John received. This was a message that all good Jews of the day had been longing for. To hear that the kingdom of God was coming and that they were being invited into it. And the brothers’ response was to do just what Jesus commanded. To repent. To completely change their lives so as to follow this man Jesus who they determined could and would show them the way. Their response was to completely change their lives so as to live into the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed.

We see this concept of *metanoia* played out in our other readings, as well. Even though the term itself is not specifically used. In our Old Testament reading from Jonah, we hear how Jonah is commanded by God to deliver a prophecy to the people of Nineveh. All the people of that great city hear the cry to repent and do so, merely based on the word of this reluctant prophet. A prophet who, himself had recently been moved to repentance. Or maybe pushed into it. As you may recall from the story of Jonah, God wanted Jonah to prophesy to the people of Nineveh, but Jonah initially refused. They were Assyrians. The enemy. Not to mention that they were not even Jewish. Why should they be warned of impending punishment? Better to let them be destroyed and be done with them. But to Jonah’s chagrin God is a merciful God.

Despite God’s urgings, Jonah refused. In fact, he ran in the opposite direction. He went so far as to get on a boat and try to get as far away from Nineveh – and God – as possible. But God had other ideas. A storm arose and the fearful sailors decided to throw Jonah overboard to appease what they viewed as the angry god of the sea. Jonah was then swallowed by a great fish. He spent three days in the belly of the fish, with plenty of time to consider his actions. Jonah cried out to God for mercy. Jonah cried out to God in repentance. Finally the fish spewed Jonah out on the shore. With this, Jonah was resolved to turn his life around. To turn away from his own desires and toward the path that God had set out for him. He continues, albeit reluctantly, on his mission to proclaim that same message of repentance, of *metanoia*, to Nineveh.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul calls the church in Corinth to turn away from the ways of this world – from the fleeting concerns of this world – and focus instead on the world to come. On the kingdom of God. Not that Paul had anything against marriage or mourning or possessions or business dealing – all things he uses as symbols for this earthly life. Rather, Paul was firmly convinced that the eschaton was imminent. That Christ would return at any time and usher in the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. In light of this conviction, he was urging his people into repentance – into *metanoia*. He knows that his people are called to live in the world. But at the same time recognizes that the things of this world are not of ultimate value. He therefore calls them to turn their lives around as they await the fulfilling of God’s purposes. To turn away from the things and concerns of this world and to seek to live fully into the Good News that Jesus proclaimed, so as to be prepared for the fulfillment of his word.

Particularly our Old Testament and Gospel readings point to the impact of this repentance – of this turning around. In repenting, in turning his life toward God, Jonah ultimately had an impact on the people living in Nineveh. They heard God’s word through him, took it to heart, and repented. They themselves turned their lives around. And in so doing, their lives were forever changed.

And we know the impact of the repentance, of the conversion of life, of Peter and Andrew, of James and John. We are the living result of their willingness to turn their lives around. These uneducated fishermen, by daring to follow Jesus, changed the world. They had the most profound impact on the world that it has ever seen. They kept Jesus’ message alive after his death. To insure that this resurrection was proclaimed. So that others would be transformed by the resurrection and made new. So that others might receive the gift of the resurrection – the gift of God’s mercy, of forgiveness, of salvation, of eternal life. So that we – you and I – would receive and benefit from this transformed life.

We tend to think of repentance as a private thing. But our Gospel reading shows us that repentance, particularly in response to conversion, as a means of transformation, is not a private thing. It is only truly accomplished in community. We see in the call of the first disciples that the focus of the proclamation of the Good News is the formation of community. Ultimately, it is community that allows, facilitates, and supports our own *metanoia* – our own turning away from our old life and turning to our true life in Christ.

As I’ve noted, it was through their own transformations that Peter, Andrew, James, and John were able to go on to change the world by continuing to proclaim and live more fully into the message of Jesus. This was only possible in community. They shared the message of the Good News with others. Who shared it with yet others. Who shared it with yet others. And so on down through the millennia. To you. Providing the community of love and support that allowed you to glimpse of the kingdom of God that is promised. That demonstrated to you the truth of that promise. That made your experience of Christ possible. That made your own transformation possible.

I remember once having a conversation with my father about apostolic succession. The concept that there is an uninterrupted transmission of spiritual authority from Jesus to the Apostles and down through the ages through successive bishops. This is foundational to our own Episcopal tradition. It’s how bishops are made. Other traditions do not recognize apostolic succession. At least not in the same way. My father’s position was that all of us who are Christian are in the apostolic succession. Precisely because of what I have just described. That each of us can, in theory, ultimately trace our religious heritage back through time directly to Jesus and the Apostles. While his was not the orthodox definition of apostolic succession, he did have a point.

Today’s Gospel is the story of a transformation and spiritual succession that began with two sets of brother and continues on to you and through you. Jesus called those brothers, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” You are one of those people. Now it’s your turn. Who will you call?