

## Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 22, 2017

**Matthew 4:12-23 (EHV)** – <sup>12</sup>When Jesus heard that John was put in prison, he withdrew into Galilee. <sup>13</sup>He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. <sup>14</sup>He did this to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: <sup>15</sup>Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, <sup>16</sup>the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned. <sup>17</sup>From that time, Jesus began to preach: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.” <sup>18</sup>As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the sea, since they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>He said to them, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup>They immediately left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup>Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. Jesus called them. <sup>22</sup>Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. <sup>23</sup>Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people.

### Introduction

What would you think if you were looking through the classifieds for a job, and in the description it said that you'd receive regular demotions and decreases in salary? If another ad contained the words, “no room for advancement,” would you trip over your feet jumping for the telephone? How would you feel about a company where you'd work your way from president to janitor? You'd probably think someone who worked for the newspaper was out for a few laughs. We can't even imagine such a situation.

### Theme: Jesus' Ministry Is One of Repentance.

But that sort of situation isn't completely unheard of. When you really think about it, that pretty much sums up the work of John the Baptist. We've heard how he preached a message of repentance to prepare people for the promised Savior. Now that the Savior had come, it was time for John to just fade into the background. In John's Gospel he even makes the statement in reference to Jesus: **“He must become greater; I must become less.”**

But even though the speaker changed, the message remained the same. In today's Gospel Lesson, we heard that Jesus also preached a message of repentance. Let's focus on that a little more today as we remember that **JESUS' MINISTRY IS ONE OF REPENTANCE**. We can divide that thought up into two parts. First, **be alert for those who need that message**. Secondly, **be among those who proclaim that message**.

### Part 1: Be alert for those who need that message.

Before we go any farther, it would probably be a good idea to remember what the word “repentance” means. We use the word often enough that most of us know the basic meaning of repent is “to change the heart or mind,” especially when it comes to sin. It's technically an inner change – a change in attitude. But that inner change also bears fruit that we can see. In other words, along with a change in our thinking, there automatically comes a change in our actions to reflect our new attitude. Those changes in behavior are called “fruits of repentance.”

Another preliminary question we need to answer is: “Why is repentance needed?” Jesus answers that in our text by quoting the prophet Isaiah: **“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, along the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and on those dwelling in the region and the shadow of death a light has dawned.”**

Why is repentance needed? Simply, because people must be led out of darkness into the light. Darkness is a metaphor the Bible uses for the state of unbelief and sin. Paul wrote to the Romans, **“Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened,”** and to the Ephesians, **“They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.”**

Obviously the light, then, is a metaphor for believing in Jesus (faith). Jesus said, **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”** The apostle John wrote, **“In him was life, and that life was the light of men.”** Paul said, **“God...made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”**

The people up north in Galilee, where the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali once existed, are used to represent all unbelievers. When the Assyrians carried many people of the northern ten tribes off into captivity, they replaced them with other Assyrians and non-Jewish peoples. When that happened, very few of God’s Old Testament people held on to the worship of the true God and to his promise of a Savior. As religions were intermingled, unbelief became the norm.

Now back to our original question: Who needs to hear Jesus’ message of repentance? Naturally, the people of our day who are living in the darkness of unbelief, need to hear it. Without that change of heart, they’ll never enter God’s heavenly mansions. They will be **“thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** How many people do you know who fit into that category right at this moment? Can you count them on your fingers? Do you need to use your toes? Could you fill a notebook? Me too! You don’t have to look very far to see unbelief. It’s debatable whether we can call the United States a Christian nation anymore, isn’t it?

Who else needs the message of repentance? As you were just making that mental list of people, whom did you think of first? Was it that foul-mouthed coworker? Was it the black sheep of your family? Was it a mother who abused her children or a dad who killed his family or the shooter of innocent victims in an international airport? Was it the follower of a false religion or the atheist next door? Or was your name at the head of the list?

Part of being alert for those who need the message of repentance means keeping a close eye on your own life. The Christian’s life is also one of repentance. Unfortunately, we’re saints and sinners at the same time. We’ve been called into the light of Christ, but part of us likes to make its home in the deepest darkness. We’ve rebelled against God time and again. Each day we see ourselves heading down the wide and dangerous boulevard, veering away from the narrow path of righteousness. Our sins have separated us from our God. Before we worry about anyone else’s repentance, we need to worry about our own.

## **Transition**

Besides being alert for those who need to hear Jesus’ message of repentance, we’re actually called by Jesus to be among those who proclaim that message.

## **Part 2: Be among those who proclaim that message.**

There’s just one little problem, though, isn’t there? Because we need repentance just as much as anyone else, it’s easy to feel painfully inadequate to proclaim it. The message of repentance – the message that John the Baptist and Jesus and his disciples preached – has two parts. We’ve already talked about the first part. To turn away from the deeds of darkness, we have to be shown that we need to change. We have to be shown that those deeds are disgusting to God and deserving of his punishment. That’s the job of the law. When we compare our lives with God’s expectations, there’s no doubt that we need a complete turnaround. But there’s a second part to repentance. It involves faith. And to bring that about, we look to the gospel.

When Paul was sent to proclaim repentance, he was just as inadequate as you and I feel. He considered himself the lowest of the low – the chief of sinners. But when God converted him, he gave him a mission. When he turned him from darkness to the light, he made him the gospel’s most outspoken champion. Listen to how Paul himself described his calling: **“I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”**

The Holy Spirit brought about that change in Paul, and he brought it about in us. Through the Spirit’s work through Word and Sacrament, we saw the light. We were miraculously turned from despair to hope, from unbelief to faith, because of the complete forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross. Because of the gospel, we’re adequately prepared and properly equipped to be proclaimers of repentance. We simply proclaim what we’ve seen take place in our own lives.

It doesn’t matter who you are or what you do. In our text, Jesus called ordinary fishermen to proclaim his message of repentance. Peter, Andrew, James, and John had no special training. They simply watched what Jesus did and listened to what he said. And then they simply shared it. Thanks to the writers of the Bible, we’ve also seen what Jesus did and we’ve heard what he said. And like Peter says, **“We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”**

The work that God has called us to do, to proclaim repentance, is very similar to fishing. All God asks of us is that we keep the nets of the gospel in the water. That’s it! He promises to take care of everything else. He draws the nets tight around those he chooses, and he lifts them into the boat for us. He cleans the catch with his own holy, precious blood. He preserves them so they remain in the faith.

It’s easy to say that he calls US to do this work, but if you really want to get specific, he’s called YOU to do it. Granted, there have been some fishing programs on TV, but fishing isn’t a spectator sport, is it? Who likes to watch someone else catch fish? It’s easy for someone to just sit back and not take part because he doesn’t enjoy it, but that’s no fun, nor is it what God intends for you to do. He’s caught you and now he’s handed you the nets of his law and gospel.

The best part about it is his promise that your fishing will be successful. He says that **“his Word won’t return to him empty, but will accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it.”** His nets aren’t hauled back in without catching something. Often it seems that we have nothing to show for our hard work, but we can’t always see the results of our proclamation of repentance. The only way we can fail is by not lowering the nets at all.

## **Conclusion**

The chain continues – Isaiah, John, Jesus, Peter. Now the Savior calls you. Follow joyfully. Proclaim boldly what he’s done. Jesus did more than just preach and teach. He redeemed us. Our ministry is to point to him as the one who takes away the sins of the world. Live in constant repentance and constantly proclaim repentance. God will bless you. Amen.