

January 22, 2023  
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is. 8:23-9:3  
Ps. 27:1, 4, 13-14  
1 Cor. 1:10-13, 17  
Matt. 4:12-23

There is an old Chinese proverb that states, “the beginning of a three thousand mile journey starts with the first step.” And so it is that whether it be long or short, hard or easy, physical or spiritual all journeys have in their genesis a firm conviction that one be willing to take the steps necessary to complete the journey – or we might ask - why even start in the first place.

Taken for granted in this statement is the assumption that the traveler knows where he or she is going, and even though they may not have all the answers as to how the journey will progress at least they need to trust the essentials necessary to finish the trek well.

Hence we see in this morning’s Gospel reading the dawning of Jesus’ public ministry, a ministry that launched itself from the city of Capernaum located on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Here we note that Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the original twelve tribal leaders of Israel who in the year 722 BC were the first to be conquered by the Assyrians and sent into exile. It would be to those held longest in darkness that Jesus would bring the message of impending freedom, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Some 700 years before Jesus, the OT prophet Isaiah prophetically wrote, “The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death - light has risen.” For these first time Gospel hearers - the time had finally come because Jesus was now wondrously fulfilling this ancient promise of freedom and hope for a better future.

Yet how unfortunate St John would later be compelled to warn,

This is the judgment: The Light has come into the world and the children of men loved the darkness more than The Light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does what is hateful hates The Light and does not come to The Light, lest his works should be convicted [or proven guilty] (John 3:19 -20 in the *Aramaic Bible in Plain English*).

But what of us today, do we post-moderns have any reason to judge the actions of those at the time of St John’s writing? I would think not.

The cure for sin is sure, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Here we notice that “*if*,” if the kingdom of heaven is our destination then repentance has surely been deemed to be the first step. “The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light;” indeed, that great light is Jesus Christ the Only Begotten Son of God and His first words concerning one’s quest for eternal freedom is the necessity of repentance.

So then consider with me for a moment the meaning of the word *repentance* and its action verb counterpart *repent*. We’ve heard these terms many times before, in fact thousands of books, homilies, and sermons have been written concerning these words,

and yet their meanings and resultant behavior somehow alludes both the learned and unlearned alike.

Hence our purpose today is not to do a comprehensive word study concerning repentance as much as it is to challenge us to be mindful of why Jesus chose to begin His public ministry by first addressing the need for repentance. Here the fact of the matter is – and this is important to remember - the kingdom of heaven eludes those who will not repent.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *metanoia* is often translated as “repentance.” Yet here in the Greek the full meaning of the English term repentance is somewhat more than just being sorry. The term *metanoia* literally means a “change of mind.”

Here it is good to know that true *metanoia* repentance is not only about guilt, regret, or shame; more than just a heart and mind assent - it implies making a transformational behavioral decision to turn around, and to face a new direction, and walk towards it.

For example, when a man or woman is caught robbing a bank, he or she may feel guilt, regret or sorrow, and rightly so. Indeed they may feel sorrow, but not because they came to the realization that they broke one of God’s commandments and/or caused others undue grief and/or harm, but they feel regret or sorrow only because they got caught and now they are to be held accountable.

So then in the context of this morning’s readings the word repent means that you and I are mandated to actually turn away from the world’s darkness and turn toward the light of Jesus Christ who alone can set us free. Bottom line, and there are no exceptions, true godly repentance demands a complete makeover - a change

of heart, a change of thinking, and a change of direction with God as one's new focus and destination.

The second half of today's Gospel reading offers an applied theology perspective concerning the popular notion of "accepting Christ" in that the Gospel actually teaches not only the necessity of making a willful decision to follow Jesus, but in addition that decision must also be evidenced with practical and measurable action. In behavioral science we say one's decisions and resultant actions must be quantitative and qualitative – measurable and accurately describing the attributes or properties of that which is desired.

For example, you may recall that one of the first missions Jesus accomplished when He started His public ministry was to call two sets of brothers as His first disciples. Peter and his brother Andrew were the first to be called, and the second set was James and his brother John.

Here we notice that all four of these men had one thing in common. They were fishermen, and fishermen know that they have to go out and work at fishing. Fish don't come to you and jump into your boat, or fly out onto the shore; thus, when Jesus called them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men," they left their fishing boats, their gear, and the water and they followed after to Him.

Technically speaking, in this context the idiom, "Come after me," literally means, "follow after someone or something" – here they were prompted by the Holy Spirit to follow after Jesus. In other words, we might say that they and we are to be in active pursuit of Jesus, and/or more precisely, *to actually become like Jesus*.

Being active is the opposite of being static. Hence the words “come after me” carry a whole lot more intrinsic meaning than just I mentally get it, or “come – let’s just hang out together.”

Indeed, Jesus was basically saying, “follow me and I will change your preoccupation with catching fish for food and profit - to a supernatural godly pursuit of catching the hearts of men and women for the glory of Our Heavenly Father.

Consequently, we can see how Matthew structurally knits the two different parts of today’s Gospel account together. Jesus went to Capernaum by the sea and preached, “repent the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Then He linked the first command with the second, “Come after me.” In other words, to each of us He says, “Turn from the darkness that holds you captive, and instead turn towards the Light of the World and follow after me.”

So there we have it, if we read today’s OT reading in Isaiah in conjunction with the Gospel reading we will discover that the two fit together hand in glove. But what of us today, for what practical purposes do these Scriptures apply to us? In other words, how do I incorporate the commands “repent and follow me” into my everyday life? Hopefully, parts of the question will be answered in our book discussion following Mass.

May I suggest here that unfortunately for many the answer to “repent and follow me” is clouded over with a post/modern Christian fog obscuring the truth concerning worship and piety. How so you might ask?

For starters, true Christian worship must meet one primary essential criterion; God must remain the focus of one's worship.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:20b). Christian author and scholar NT Wright and others have subsequently cautioned, "You become like what you worship. When you gaze in awe, admiration, and wonder at something or someone, you begin to take on something of the character of the object of your worship."

In other words the agenda, the artist, the facilities, or its programs can never take the spot light or the center stage away from the Creator.

You see our worship must be God centered. God is the subject, we are the object, and not the other way around. If worship is not God centered, it becomes a form of idolatry. Here we can take to heart the words of King David the psalmist. We read what he wrote earlier, "One thing I ask of the Lord; this I seek; to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life that I may gaze on the loveliness of the Lord."

For King David, worship consisted of keeping his eyes on the beauty of the Lord and nothing else.

Now in concert with the Psalmist please listen to a quote taken from a popular publication known as the World Challenge Pulpit Series written by Gary Wilkerson, the son of the now deceased, but still well-known former pastor David Wilkerson. The younger Pastor Wilkerson warns,

Scripture is filled with cautions about bringing empty worship to God. The Lord warned His prophets and priests, “You’ve healed the wounds of your people, but only superficially, in other words you made them feel good for the moment. They forget about their struggles. But you planted a false hope in them.”

Concerning his take on many lost and misguided churches he went on to say,

Our approach to worship today is like the TV program “The Voice.” The show’s panel of judges keeps their backs turned so they can’t see the performers. Their only standard is, “Do I like it?” That’s also the only standard a lot of Christians bring to their church’s worship; “Do I like it?” Like the judges on “The Voice,” we want to be entertained rather than bow our knees.

One last quote please, because I think it demands our consideration. Wilkerson went on to say,

Its time to clear the stage of surveys that ask people what they want from church rather than asking what God wants. If surveys dictate our direction, we may as well take down our sign that reads, “church” because we won’t be one. We will be a professional organization like any other – one that seeks success based on market demands. That’s not the Gospel.

To glean the “whole” of the constructive criticism offered in this one article by Gary Wilkerson would take hours to unpack, fortunately for many of us he was preaching to the choir.

However, let us be clear that just because we worship God in the manner of the early church and its ancient sacred liturgies, it does not excuse us from exercising the gift of repentance that restores our souls and refocuses God's Presence in our corporate worship.

Indeed, all the necessary components are present in our liturgical worship to truly practice His Presence yet for Him to have total access to our hearts still remains contingent on today's Gospel admonition for humility and a willingness to repent of sin, and then ardently follow after Him.

I want us to know that this homily was not intended to put any one person or group down or to raise up any particular organization; rather, it is intended to make us think, examine our hearts, and draw our attention back to the matter of true repentance and how we choose to worship God. Secondly, we need to ask, do our corporate times of worship, and my private worship demonstrate a true *metanoia* turning from darkness to the light, and finally – am I willing to forsake all to follow Him?

Needless to say, personal judgment has no place in the Church because each person's cross is different and unique to his or her own particular situation.

However may I suggest that we are admonished and even encouraged to skillfully and academically judge creeds, doctrines, popular traditions, and any number of church rules and regulations in accordance with Holy Scripture and what was held to be truly catholic according to the Canon of St Vincent of Lerins; believed everywhere, by all, and in all times.



Therefore let us continue to pray for one another and support one another as we together endeavor to walk in humility and repentance in the Kingdom of Heaven.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen