

Third Sunday after Epiphany Year A

Think Again

[RCL] Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Today is January 22nd and we are just about three weeks into 2017. Did you make any resolutions this year? If you did, how are they holding up?

New Year's resolutions can be big or small. Do any of these sound familiar?

- This year, I will eat less, drink less, exercise more.
- This year, I will put down my phone and pay attention to the people around me.
- This year, I will find a place to volunteer and make a difference in the world.

Making a New Year's resolution is a kind of repentance. We make New Year's resolutions because we recognize our ongoing need for conversion to the new life of God's Kingdom. We know that we aren't living up to the full potential God is calling us to. We are sorry for falling short, and we promise to do better in the future.

Now that three weeks have passed, we may already have to repent for not living up to the resolutions we made. But that's okay: God always accepts our repentance. As long as we continue to turn toward God, God will be there to welcome us.

There's more to repentance than personal conversion, however. Being sorry and promising to be better is part of it, but it isn't the whole picture. In fact, the "being sorry" part of repentance really isn't going to help you change your ways until you get an idea of what that the bigger picture is.

Let's consider the word in the Gospel that is translated "repent." The Greek word Jesus uses is "metanoia" (*met-an'-oy-ah*). "Meta" is a preposition that can be translated many different ways, but usually it means "after." "Noia" is a verb and means "to think," "to perceive." Put them together and you have something like, "to think after," "to see after."

But—after what? The interesting thing about this word—about repentance—is that the word itself implies a two-way street. Repentance isn't just something we do to or for God. We aren't able to do it—to repent—until *after* God comes to us and opens our eyes and enables our response. Only then are we able "to think after." Perhaps the English phrase that catches the meaning best is "to think again." God enables us to think again about our actions, to think better about them, and to change our ways going forward.

In the Gospel of Matthew today, Jesus announces the beginning of his ministry with the words,

“Repent! For the Kingdom of heaven has come near.” Or as we might translate it: “Think again! God’s Kingdom is almost here.”

This declaration is the starting point for all of Jesus’ teaching. Everything that comes after grows out of his idea that God’s Kingdom is coming to displace the Kingdoms of the world that have perpetuated injustice and impoverished God’s people.

Jesus comes out of the wilderness proclaiming this message, but we aren’t really told to whom. The assumption that most people make is that repentance is primarily a personal matter: I had better repent of my own personal sin. And of course, we had better— we are all better off when we do repent. But in this passage, “repentance” is not the message Jesus brings to individuals. Individuals like Peter and Andrew and James and John (and perhaps, you and me) get a different message: “Follow me.”

So then, who is the recipient of the “repent” message? Think again—the kingdom of heaven has come near! There is a challenge in this pronouncement. Who is Jesus really telling to step aside? It isn’t the common people, like Peter and John, the people down on the ground. The coming of God’s Kingdom is good news for the poor.

The person who’s got to be worried if a new king shows up is the old king. In this case it was Caesar, the Emperor of Rome, and all of Caesar’s client kings and subordinate rulers and hangers-on who benefited from his reign. Now why would Caesar need to think again?

This is a good question, and its answer is tied to another question you may be asking: why exactly were Peter and Andrew and John and the others so eager to quit fishing for fish and start fishing for people? It seems remarkable how quickly they respond to Jesus’ invitation. “Follow me,” Jesus says, and Matthew tells us, “immediately they left their nets and followed him.” They give up their livelihoods without a second thought to follow an itinerant preacher around the Galilean countryside.

This response is remarkable, but maybe not as remarkable as it seems. For us, of course, if we think of fishing at all, we are much more likely to think of a sunny mountain stream or a lazy afternoon on a boat. But Peter and Andrew and John weren’t fishing for sport—they were fishing to survive. They were merely cogs in the economy of the Roman Empire. In fact, fishermen were so heavily taxed for the right to fish the sea of Galilee that their backbreaking labor netted them just enough to survive, but little else.

You can begin to see why Jesus was put to death by the Roman authorities as a political revolutionary: the first act of his ministry was to tell the Emperor to “think again,” and in the next moment, to liberate some of the cogs in the Emperor’s great machine.

The Roman Empire seems long ago and far away—something fantastical and unreal that we know only from television and movies. The real Roman Empire wasn’t a good place to be a peasant. By Jesus’ time it was a totalitarian domination system. Which we like to think has nothing to do with us, safe in

our modern western democracy.

Nevertheless, the picture God is trying to reveal to us through these stories from long ago—part of the thing that will help us “think again” and maybe alter our course—is that concentrated wealth and power still tend to be bad news for those at the bottom of the economic system.

There are still powers and rulers in our world today, in government or in business, who abuse their position to benefit themselves and their friends, to the detriment of the vast majority of God’s people. How are we to resist these powers? Especially when most of us benefit in some way because the system is set up the way it is. Can we build a world where resources are shared and not hoarded? Where God’s love and God’s justice rule? Where Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of heaven becomes a reality?

Jesus is calling us to join in this work. His invitation today is: Follow me. It is up to us to build God’s Kingdom, and Jesus tells us that we can. When we repent. When we think again. Every time we open our hands and hearts to share God’s abundance with those in need brings God’s Kingdom closer. Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask for it—your Kingdom come on earth, as in heaven.

Amen.

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