

Epiphany 3 1/24/21
Mark 1:14-20 B

NOW AFTER JOHN WAS ARRESTED, JESUS CAME INTO GALILEE, PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF GOD.

What do you do with a fish after you catch it? I'm not asking you anything profound, insightful, or absurd this morning. I'm asking a simply, straight-forward question: What happens to a fish after you catch it? Well, I suppose, if you are doing catch-and-release fishing, you put it back in the water. But, for the sake of the sermon today, let's say it's not catch-and-release fishing, and you land a beautiful 16, 17-inch walleye. Or better yet, you land a 12-pound walleye. What are you going to do with it? Simply: you are going to kill it. Whether you eat that walleye or take that 12-pounder to the taxidermist, that walleye will die.

After John the Baptizer is arrested by Herod Antipas in Galilee, there Jesus goes – right to the belly of the beast, the stronghold of where the forces of hell want the Gospel silenced. There, Jesus speaks, “Repent, Believe, and Follow.” Three imperatives, three commands from the lips of Jesus.

And, you wonder why I'm talking about walleyes. When you catch a walleye, a fish, you take it out of its natural environment and it dies. Today, heeding and obeying the imperatives, the commands of Jesus, we are taken out of our natural environment of a world dead in sin and we die – we die to all sin and evil desires. And the Good News of the Gospel is that we don't stay dead, but we rise to a new life in Christ to live before God in righteousness and purity today and forever.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light,” Isaiah writes (9:2). That darkness of sin was all too evident in Galilee, where the

tetrarch Herod Antipas arrested John and put him in prison. Eventually, he would, quite literally, cut off the Baptizer's head to try and silence the Gospel. The darkness of the evil in Nineveh cried out to God. The Christians in the city of Corinth to whom Paul wrote the words of our Epistle reading were still walking in the darkness of sin.

We are in the Galilees, the Nineveh's, the Corinth's of the world, be it called Glen Ullin, Beulah, Bismarck, or New York City, but, My Dear Friends in Christ, we who are baptized into Christ Jesus are called not to be "of" them. And, yet, we find ourselves pretty comfortable here. Oh no, we would never do those things, but we are pretty accepting of sin and evil, and we fear men more than we fear God, so we are not about to call our neighbors out of the death of their sin.

Paul writes the words of our Epistle to the Christians living in the city of Corinth. Most were adult converts to the faith. They came out of a context and culture where sexual perversity was not only normal behavior, it was widely accepted. In our lesson, Paul addresses marriage, the 6th Commandment. Very simply this: when God gave us marriage, did He give us a blessing or curse? You know what you are supposed say to answer that question, right? But, how does your life and the intents and desires of your heart answer that question? Watch a movie lately? If you have, you well know that what you saw was adultery or fornication. Were you outraged? God is. Are you content with the spouse God has given you? Or does that woman in the magazine or on the internet promise that your life would be absolutely perfect if only she was your wife? When you are at work or play and someone tells an off-color joke, do you call them to repentance? Or, maybe it's just easier to laugh hysterically with everyone else, to go along, to get along.

And, by the way, that's just 1 – one – of the 10 Commandments. There's still believing the promises of God's Word, especially in the hour of despair and worry. Obeying those in authority over you, even when we don't like them or their laws very much. Helping your neighbor, when you want to buy more toys for yourself. Not gossiping, not being jealousy, not being angry and keeping a record of wrongs. The darkness of our sin truly is dark.

"Repent," Jesus says. Turn from your sins. Turn away from them in sorrow and contrition, mourning how you have messed things up. Change your mind, change your way of thinking, from the world's way of thinking and from the selfish desires of your flesh, which is always focused on itself. Recognize how you have broken God's commandments, how you have not loved God with your whole heart, how you have not loved your neighbor as yourself. That's what sin is. That's what being a sinner is. Own it. Confess it. Don't rationalize it or excuse your sins. Don't compare yourself to other people, focusing on how bad they are. No, look in the mirror of God's Law. See how you have sinned – in thought, word, and deed, in what you have done wrong and in what you have failed to do right. Admit you're a sinner, deserving only God's temporal and eternal punishment. All that – yes, all of that – is packed into this one word of Jesus, "Repent." That is Jesus speaking to you today.

But thank God, Jesus has another word to speak to you today. And it is this: "Believe in the gospel." The gospel is the good news of God's undeserved favor toward sinners like you and me. God does not have only words of judgment to speak to us, but that He also speaks words of salvation and grace, words of comfort and consolation.

And, that Gospel sounds like this, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light” (Is 9:2). That great light is Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus appeared in the flesh as the babe born of the Virgin Mary. The Lord Jesus took on flesh and blood because you have flesh and blood. He had no sin but He became sin for you to save you from your sins and it wages of death. To do that, He lived a life of perfect obedience to all the Commandments of God. And because you broke those Commandments, Jesus bore your sins in His body on the cross. Because He shed His holy blood with His innocent suffering and death on that cross, you, Dear Child of God, are forgiven.

This gift is received through faith. That’s why Jesus says, “Believe in the gospel.” But you also know the 3rd Article, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.” So, God the Holy Spirit works faith in you through the water and the Word of your baptism so that you do believe, you trust, rejoice, and find comfort in Jesus as your Savior. “Repent and believe the Gospel,” Jesus calls to you this very day. And the Master’s call is a call to you to die to sin and rise to new life in Him.

And, as the Good Shepherd continues to call you by name in the hearing and learning of His Word and as He gives you His life-giving body and blood in His Holy Supper, He continues to awaken that faith He began at your baptism and strengthen it, so that you can repent of your sin and believe the Gospel.

And, Jesus speaks another word to you today, “Follow Me.” This is the word that Jesus spoke to those fishermen, way back when, calling them to be his disciples. To be a disciple of Jesus is to follow him in faith and to

learn from him. It means that Christ Jesus shapes and molds us in His image, so that we can be Christ to our neighbor.

It means to live a life of love towards God and your neighbor. Serve and obey those in authority over you, even when it comes to doing your homework and driving the speed limit. Forgive the one who has wronged you. Take the imitative to seek reconciliation where relationships have been strained. Love and honor the spouse God has given you. Help your neighbor in their every need. Speak well of your neighbor, praising their good actions and qualities. Be content with the daily bread God has given you. All of this is what Jesus means when He says, "Follow Me."

Dear friends, Jesus comes to us today, here, in this place, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Hear his voice and heed his call. Jesus comes to us today, to our Galilee, to our fishing boats, summoning us to the new life of adventure He has for us as His disciples, speaking to each one of us his powerful words of life, "Follow me."