

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

21 January 2009

Saint Mark's, Tampa

✠ **I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

But you can't believe in the good news until you let go of the old news.

That's what repentance really means. We think of repentance as something backward-looking. We look back over our past and regret the things we have done. But the Bible speaks of repentance as something forward-looking. Repenting really means turning around and reorienting yourself, committing to a new direction, focusing with intensity and determination on a new path.

And that's why I say that you can't believe in the good news until you let go of the old news.

Jonah, bless his heart, had real trouble letting go of the old news. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up against me."

Nineveh?! Isn't that just like God, to send me to Nineveh! You know, Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, the enemy and oppressor of Israel.

Jonah isn't having it. Nineveh is off to the east, so he buys a ticket for the farthest point west he can think of, a place called Tarshish. He boards the ship and, well, I'm sure you remember this part. There's a great storm, Jonah is identified as the one responsible, and the sailors toss him overboard. The sailors are saved because the storm immediately subsides, and Jonah too is saved because God appoints a great fish to swallow him up, and Jonah is in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

From the belly of the great fish Jonah cries out to God, and God causes the fish to vomit out Jonah upon the dry land. Let me just say in passing that the book of Jonah is actually quite hilarious. The picture of Jonah solemnly praying from the fish's innards and then getting spewed out is really funny, and the whole book is full of satire and parody and comedy. It's very short, too – just a couple of pages in your Bible. I highly recommend it.

Anyway, the newly vomited Jonah again receives the word of the Lord: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” This time Jonah goes. He proclaims the message: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” And the people of Nineveh believed God. Even the king repented.

So Jonah should be really psyched, right? He’s the *best prophet ever*. People have actually listened to him. They’ve repented. They’ve turned around, reoriented themselves.

But actually Jonah is *furious*. He yells at God: “See, I *knew* you were going to pull this kind of stunt. That is exactly why I ran away in the first place. I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Big softie! I preach a nice message of judgment and then you relent. Typical. I’m so mad I could die. Just kill me now.”

Hating the Assyrians, feeling superior to them, loving the message of judgment: that’s all old news. Jonah is comfortable with the old news. He knows how to preach fire and brimstone against loathsome people like the Assyrians. But this other stuff – about God’s being gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love – this *good news* – well, if that’s true, it pulls the rug right out from under Jonah. That’s not what he signed on for, not at all. Better to run away, better to pout, better to *die*, than to let go of the comfort and security and reassuring familiarity of the old news.

Isn’t it good news that the Assyrians have turned from their violence and wickedness, have re-oriented themselves to God? Of course. But Jonah can’t handle the good news, because he’s clinging so tightly to the old news.

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

And Simon and Andrew, James and John, *repented*. They turned from an old life to a new one. It’s not that the old life was bad and sinful and evil; we have no reason to believe that these men were conspicuously sinful in the way that the Ninevites were. But Jesus is calling them to turn their backs on that life and embrace something new.

We need to appreciate just how hard it must have been for them to commit themselves to this good news. Why leave a good thing? Fishing was big business, and they were doing pretty well. Zebedee and Sons was a successful enough business that they had employees. And James and John leave their nets, leave their father, leave the hired men, leave the boat, and turn their lives upside down.

Their security and prosperity: old news. Their loyalty to their father and the family business: old news. The only way of life they'd ever known – heck, the only way of life anyone they *knew* had ever known: old news.

And to turn to what, exactly? They don't really know. Something about the kingdom breaking in, something about fishing for people instead of fish, something about believing in the good news. It all comes down to following Jesus, and who knows where that will lead? But attaching yourself to Jesus, committing yourself to Jesus, leaving everything else behind to follow Jesus: that's what it *means* to believe in the good news. Believing in the good news doesn't mean believing a list of approved doctrines. I wish it did. I find that part easy. When it comes to checking off boxes on the List of Approved Christian Beliefs, I do great.

But Jesus doesn't say *believe* the good news. He says believe *in* the good news. That means committing yourself to it. It means repentance – not the gloomy, mopey backward-looking kind of repentance, but the determined, focused, forward-looking repentance, reorienting our lives. It's not adherence to a teaching; it's attachment to the Teacher.

And that's hard. The old news is so seductive. We're comfortable in our boats, mending our nets, minding our own business. We're comfortable with our family, with our friends, with our old loves and our old hatreds. This good news – if we really commit ourselves to it – to *him* – why, it will turn our lives upside down, pull the rug right out from under us. And then where will we be?

Those who have wives will have to be as though they had none, and those who mourn will have to be as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. That doesn't mean that we'll actually leave our spouses, quit our jobs, retire from the world, stop mourning in times of sadness and rejoicing in times of joy. But it does mean that those things won't hold us, because our ultimate loyalty will be elsewhere: not to our dad and our employees in the boat, not to our old grudge against the Assyrians, but to this new thing, this kingdom that is breaking in, this good news.

But you can't believe in the good news until you let go of the old news. And I won't lie to you: letting go of the old news isn't easy. The old news is comfortable. We're used to it. We know how it works. If we let go of it, who knows what God might ask of us?

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”