

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Epiphany 3-B; 21 January 2018
Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster

Repent!

In nomine...

I. Intro: Last sermon at Epiphany

Today I enter this pulpit with a mixture of emotions. I have had the privilege of walking among you for nearly two years, and Epiphany has become very dear to my heart. But my assignment here was as a Curate, and in the Diocese of Olympia, a Curate's term is for a maximum of two years. Afterward, the Curate is expected to move on to what comes next, to serve as an Associate Priest or as a Rector someplace. The calling I have discerned, together with much counsel, is to serve as Rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Glassboro, New Jersey, about half an hour outside of Philadelphia.

St. Thomas' is a strong, healthy congregation situated literally across the street from Rowan University, which itself has been growing by leaps and bounds. It is a place with much to recommend it and a lot of potential. It also happens to be in the region of the country in which I grew up, where most of my family still lives, and where my children were born.

So I find myself in a curious position. I am excited about moving and all the possibilities that lie ahead. And I am sad about moving and all the relationships I leave behind. Change is always difficult. As Doyt pointed out last week, our bodies crave the easy, the familiar: disruption of time and place and habit is scary and uncomfortable. Both joy and apprehension are at work in me this morning!

Change is always difficult. And yet change is at the center of our Gospel reading today:

After John was arrested, 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." (Mk 1.14f. NRSV)

Something has changed: the Kingdom of God has come near. What do I do in response? Jesus invites *me* to change as well: that's what we call repentance. So today I want to talk about the Kingdom of God and about Repenting. We'll start with the Kingdom of God.

II. Thesis: The Kingdom of God has Come Near

During my time at Epiphany I have learned many things. I have been coached on recruiting volunteers to get things done. I have participated in a very intentional and hospitable practice of welcoming newcomers. I have been exposed to some fabulous metaphors: the church as a gym for the soul, and spiritual disciplines as exercises that bring spirit and body into alignment. We talk about how relationship is primary. But the theme I have appreciated more than any other while at Epiphany is the constant emphasis on the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is this close, right here, right now. The Kingdom of God is a perfectly safe place to be. That is because the Kingdom of God is where everything happens according to God's will, in God's way, in God's time. And I have appreciated hearing so much about that because the Kingdom of God is exactly what Jesus preached.

Now most of us live most of our lives trying to be kings of our own little worlds. There's a great line in a Lyle Lovett song about having failed to attract the interest of a particular woman in a bar. He sings, "Yes well there I sat so all alone, Like a king who sits upon his throne, And whose kingdom may have just gone home, With another king."

And that, in a nutshell, is the problem with living in the kingdom of Todd. Or the kingdom of Bob. Or the kingdom of Linda. When we try to live as kings of our own little kingdoms, we are quickly going to become quite frustrated. Why will be frustrated? Because we're *not* kings, or if we are, our kingdoms are very, very little! Things aren't always going to go our way. We don't always get to do what we want, when we want to, how we want to. We are constantly running up against the limits of our little, little kingdoms! As my children will attest, I can't even make one hair on my head turn black or white!

III. Good News: To repent is to recognize reality and respond accordingly.

So this is the good news: Jesus' invitation to repent does not mean to follow arbitrary rules or to conform to some random person's standards of right and wrong. To repent does not mean to feel sorry or to deny who you are. **To repent simply means to recognize the reality that is and to respond accordingly.**

“Repent” is kind of a dirty word these days. I associate the word with placards held up by men, it’s usually men, on street-corners or near Safeco Field or even across the street from my parish in Bellingham. I instinctively resent the implication that these placard-bearers think they know God better than I do: they’re challenging my religious competency! Or maybe it’s just that I don’t like to be told what to do!

Repentance is often associated with judgement and with the keeping of particular rules and standards, usually someone else’s rules and standards. It often seems to be about one person imposing their will upon another.

Jesus’ call to repentance is simply an invitation to recognize the reality of the Kingdom of God.

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

When is the Kingdom of God? The time is fulfilled: the Kingdom of God is right now. Where is the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God has come near: it is closer than the electron is to a proton in a single atom. The Kingdom of God is here and it is now.

The scientist who refuses to take her experimental data seriously and to repent, that is to adjust her hypothesis accordingly, is going to be frustrated and unhappy. The driver who fails to take road conditions into consideration and repent, that is to adjust his steering and braking habits when the road is wet, is going to be frustrated and unhappy. So the soul that refuses to embrace the Kingdom of God and repent, that is to learn to transcend its own tiny kingdom of limits and impotence, is going to be frustrated and unhappy.

I live in God’s world (not mine!), the place where God is sovereign (not me!), and to repent is to recognize that fact and to rejoice in it.

IV. Invitation: Be prepared to answer Jesus’ call!

This is the response we see modeled for us today by Jesus’ disciples. Andrew and Simon, James and John were all busy with their own business, building their own little kingdoms. But when

Jesus called them to come follow him, their response was uniform. “Immediately” occurs twice in our passage, once for each pair of brothers and their response to Jesus.

These men were not strangers to Jesus. In the Kingdom of God, relationship is primary. These were already Jesus’ friends and disciples. They had their work to do and they pursued it faithfully. But when they heard Jesus’ invitation to repentance, they recognized they lived in God’s Kingdom, not their kingdom, and that Jesus now called them to live in God’s kingdom in a different way. They were ready to hear God’s voice.

How did I make my decision to go to New Jersey? Was that decision all about Todd? Or about the needs of my family? Certainly those were contributing factors – but they were not sufficient factors for us to make such a momentous move. I didn’t begin looking for another church to serve until I was prompted to do so by our Bishop. Then I sought to listen to God’s calling, consulting with a spiritual director, with Doyt, with Kate, and with various other friends whose judgment I trust and who I know stand constantly before the Lord in prayer. As I encountered various churches in search of an Associate or a Rector, I listened for the resonance of God’s spirit in me responding to God’s spirit in them. The road ahead is rarely crystal clear to me: I suppose that’s why we call what we do a journey of *faith*. Faith, and the fact that I am living in the Kingdom of God rather than the Kingdom of Todd, calls me to look, listen, pray, and continually repent, or adapt what I’m thinking and what I’m doing to the call of God as it is revealed to me, bit by little bit.

Thank you, Epiphany parish, for loving my family and me. Thank you for participating in my formation as a priest in the Episcopal church and for modeling healthy, authentic Christian community: for showing me what it really means to be church. Thank you for entrusting me with open ears and open hearts.

Jesus’ invitation to you and me both is to be ready. We are to engage the work before us for the season it is given to us. And we are always invited to look to God’s kingdom rather than our own. When we get a little too stuck in our own ways, that is the time to Repent! Change! To resist the temptation to live as our own little kings, constantly frustrated by the limits of our own little kingdoms, and to live into the eternal, unbounded, and intrinsically, incorruptibly “good” Kingdom of God.

Sermon Questions:

1. When do you attempt to reign over your own little kingdom?
2. Is it hard for you to let others tell you what to do? Why?
3. What might it look like for you to repent in answer to Jesus' call? What would change?