

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Feb 22nd 2015

In today's gospel Jesus makes his first public appearance calling out to his fellow Galileans: "Repent and believe in the gospel."

Recall that for thirty years Jesus had lived unobtrusively in Galilee. No one paid any special attention to him. He was simply "the carpenter's son."

Recall also that Jesus had left Galilee to be baptized in Judea in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. While praying after the baptism the sky opens, a dove appears and he hears the words "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased." Jesus spends forty days in the desert "unpacking" his experience — driven by the Spirit.

Then returning to Galilee Jesus boldly he proclaims God's new call to Jews: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel" Jesus announces that Jews can no longer be faithful to God's covenant simply by following God's revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai and observing the Torah. God is calling the Jews to "repent" and to observe the path he now preaches.

Peter's letter unabashedly echoes Jesus' call. Yes, Christ was indeed put to death, but now he has been miraculously resurrected through the Spirit and he now saves us through the waters of baptism. Peter reminded his readers of that earlier covenant God established after the flood with Noah and his sons. Never again will God destroy all bodily creatures. God gives the rainbow as the sign of this covenant. Just as Noah had been saved from the waters of the flood so now we who respond to Christ's call will be saved by the waters of baptism.

His audience is taken aback. Could any Jew ever have imagined this new moment in their history! Jews are called to "repent" -- to turn away from their previous path -- and to turn toward the path now proclaimed by Jesus.

The Jews faced a momentous decision.

We Christians this first Sunday of Lent also face a momentous decision. Will we heed the words spoken to us on Ash Wednesday when we received ashes on our foreheads: "Turn away from your sins and be faithful to the gospel." Are we willing to reexamine the depths of our heart and probe our fidelity to the new covenant presented by Jesus? Are we willing to examine attitudes that have consciously or unconsciously arisen from our materialistic and individualistic culture regarding material prosperity and career fulfillment, relationships and sexual gratification, indifference to the needy and marginalized, callousness regarding the environment.

Lent is much more than simply giving up a few favorite indulgences. It is an invitation for total renewal of our hearts. Our hearts will be renewed to the degree we open them to God, seek God's grace, turn away from our sins and embrace the good news proclaimed by Jesus. We pray with the psalmist:

"Your ways, O Lord, make known to me;

teach me your paths,

Guide me in your truth and teach me,

for you are my God and savior."

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