



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 3 (A)

Repent, Look for Signs of the Kingdom, & Follow Jesus

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

There's a story about a farmer from a rural part of the country. And this farmer comes to visit a relative in a major city. They're walking down the busy and noisy main street, amidst the clamor and confusion and traffic and general hubbub of the city at rush hour. And just then, a fire truck goes by, siren blazing. And the farmer says, "Listen: I hear a cricket over yonder." The relative — the carefully conditioned city dweller — replies, "How can you hear a cricket in the middle of all this?" The chirp of a cricket in the very core of a buzzing city — we can't hear that, right? But the farmer, unfazed, says, "I figure you hear what you're listening for." And with that, he takes the spare change from his pants pocket and drops it on the ground. And at the almost imperceptible sound of a few coins hitting the sidewalk, children stop in their tracks, heads turn, notice is taken.

Sounds real, doesn't it? Most of us would hear the coins and miss the crickets.

"I figure you hear what you're listening for." That's a powerful statement for us as a Christian community.

Jesus said it another way, in last week's gospel: "What are you looking for?" And this is the challenge before us today: what are we looking for, who are we listening to, what are we valuing most in our common life together?

These are demanding concepts, for they compel us to consider our spiritual priorities. We must discern and decide what is important to us — what will we be looking for, what are we going to listen to, what will we value most in our common life together?

These are questions that require and charge us to consider our past. And these are questions that lead us to a full, honest, and accurate assessment of our current situation. But mostly, these are questions that inspire us to look to our future.

And, in today's gospel, Jesus gives us clear directives about our past, our present, and our future. Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms what we are to look for, what we are to listen to, and what we must value above all else.

First, the past — clear and simple, unambiguous and direct, Jesus says it this way: “Repent.”

Repent — for we are all of us sinners, we have each one of us and all of us together failed to live up to our true calling, we have made mistakes, we have fallen down.

And Jesus says, basically, “Get up and try again.” Repent. We are forgiven, loved, and free. And so repent, turn around at the sound of a cricket, try again to hear God’s voice.

And this is not to say we’ve been notoriously sinful or wicked — at least not any more than anybody else. We all of us make choices, and frequently we make poor ones.

This is to say that we are human, that we want to do so much better than we so frequently are able, that we want to let go of small annoyances and petty gripes and senseless quarrels among us — and grab on to what is really important.

So, repent.

And that will bring us to the present: What is really important is that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus lived among us, not to predict some future and yet-unachieved utopia, but to proclaim that God’s mercy, justice, and love are already here — manifest, in this place, now. So close we can touch, taste, smell, see, and hear — if that is what we are listening for.

This is not to deny the sometimes-painful realities of our world — not to forget about hunger amidst so much waste, or homelessness amidst economic vitality, or sickness amidst amazing healing power.

This is to say we are all of us sinners, and that we can make a choice whether to dwell on life’s problems or to look for life’s opportunities. Are we going to wrestle with the devil, or dance with the savior? Taste and see, for our God is gracious — and God’s kingdom has drawn near.

So, look around for signs of the kingdom, here and now.

And as for the future: Jesus says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” We are called — each and every one of us, and all of us together — to bring the light of lights into the world, to proclaim to all people the Good News of salvation, to make known the glory of God’s marvelous works.

Our calling as a Christian community is not to repair the roof, or balance the books, or print up the bulletin. Oh, these things are important — essential to the building up of Christ’s body, really.

But budgets and reports and achievements — they are not our mission, they are not what Jesus calls us to listen to, they are not what our Lord and Savior commands us to value. When we follow, Jesus makes us fishers of men, ambassadors of Christ, evangelists.

When we follow Jesus, we acknowledge and admit that we are marvelously made, that God's works are wonderful, and that we know this very well.

It's like suddenly noticing a light that has been burning all along, or hearing a cricket that has always hidden underneath the din our existence — for the only thing that changes is our attitude, our perception, our choice.

So—this is the charge to us today: “Let it shine.” Repent, and it will shine. Look for signs that the kingdom that has drawn near, and it will shine. Follow Christ, and it will shine.

And what will happen if we let it shine? What is it, exactly? What will we let shine, precisely?

Will the bills get paid if we don't open our mail? Will we continue to have bake sales or a sewing group or a garden guild if no one volunteers to work?

Will the copy machine repair itself if we simply pray? — probably not. We need to attend to these things, to be sure. But if, instead of harboring resentments, we work toward forgiveness, instead of marking divisions we seek agreement, instead of simply praying we pray simply — then what will shine will be the very light of salvation, the sure and certain hope of everlasting life, the gifts of God for the people of God.

Pray simply, repenting of your past mistakes. Pray simply, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has drawn near. Pray simply, promising, “Yes, Lord, we will follow you.”

So, how can we put this into action? Simple, just ask yourself these three simple questions:

1. Am I a sinner? If your answer isn't “yes,” you are lying — to yourself, to others, and to God.
2. Do I want to change? If your answer isn't “yes,” you need help — the kind of help that is offered at the holy table of God.
3. And, do I believe? — truly and earnestly believe in my heart of hearts — that God's kingdom has drawn near? If your answer isn't “yes,” you are exactly like all the rest of us, everyone here — skeptical that God could love us so much as to allow us to make such important choices.

And then make those choices.

Choose to repent of past sins. Choose to look for signs of the kingdom here in the present. Choose to follow Jesus into the future — and he will provide all you need to fish for people.

Repent: that's not a commandment, that's an invitation. If you don't know how, then ask, and it will be given to you.

Look around us for the kingdom: that's not a game of making something happen, but a matter of noticing what has already been accomplished. If you don't know where to look, then search, and you will find.

And follow Jesus: that's not a quick fix to all life's problems, but a promise that walking in the way of the cross will fling wide the gates of heaven. Knock, and it will be opened for you.

Repent. Look for the signs around us. And follow Jesus. For God's grace did invite us, and God's love shall unite us — to work for the kingdom and answer our call.

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates** for Epiphany 3 (A) in 2020.*