

Lent 1B

Mark 1:9-15

Repent and believe...

Jesus calls us into our Lenten Journey this morning with the same words, the same message that he spoke in Galilee 200 years ago as he began his earthly ministry: "The kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!"

We recognize the call to repentance as being central to our Lutheran theology. It is, after all, the very first of the 95 Theses that began the Reformation 500 years ago. Luther put it this way: "*When our Lord and Master said, 'Repent', he willed the whole life of the believer to be one of repentance.*" In other words, repentance is not something we can point to as having once and now we're good to go. Nor is it even something that we just do annually at the beginning of Lent. This is not news to most of us. We recognize that it's an on-going necessity. It's why we begin worship every week with the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness.

But we may still be missing Luther's point: once a year isn't enough. Once a week isn't enough. The point of our Lutheran doctrine is that every waking minute of every day ought to be orchestrated around repentance, because, as he reminds us in the Small Catechism, "we sin every day and deserve nothing but punishment!"

The bar for repentance is set much higher than we may have understood! It may cause us to ask, "What, exactly is it that we're supposed to repent of? What is it that we have done that is so terrible to warrant the need for on-going repentance like this?"

Lutheran theology would have us begin our reflection on this question by considering the Commandments, especially the first. It is our Lord Jesus that taught us that the first Commandment is the greatest: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength and all your mind. And the second Commandment is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

At this point, being the good church-going folk that we are, recognition dawns and we declare, "Oh! Yeah! We've heard that before!" And like liturgical parrots, in unison we burst out with: "We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we done and what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves...". (Yeah, yeah, blah, blah...) Many

times we can almost feel our eyes glaze over as we recite the words! How lightly we want to brush off our failure as though it were no big deal!

Our catechism has tried to make it more real, to put some teeth to the commandment by teaching us that to have no other God is to fear, love and trust the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit above all else.

What does that kind of fear, love and trust look like? Before we nonchalantly dismiss our continual disobedience as little more than petty indiscretion, we need to let the Old Testament reading illustrate and describe it for us.

After scores of years of waiting and decades of doubt, Abraham and Sarah finally have living proof of the covenant that God had made to them: Isaac, the child of the promise. Now, everything that God had promised and provided is on the line; will Abraham obey or not? Does he really fear, love and trust this terrifying God against all reason and logic or not?

Our Lutheran theology struggles to come to our aid: We struggle to remind ourselves that God is just testing his faith; it is faith that counts, not works like obedience, because who can obey completely like that?

But here's the problem for us: obedience is being put on the same level as faith! Certainly we are saved by faith and not by works, but Abraham is showing us what that saving faith looks like! Saving faith is characterized by a level of obedience that is nothing short of horrifying. The promises God made to Abraham are confirmed for him in the wake of his obedience: **17** I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his^[d] enemies, **18** and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." How are we doing so far?

What do we have to repent of??? To what degree have we failed to fear, love and trust God above all else? If Abraham is the standard, where are you and I? Most often we don't want to obey his voice in the little day-to-day challenges and tests that he presents us. If the Promise rests on faith that responds in obedience that puts everything else that we love on a burning altar, do we now have something to repent of? And we want to brush it off like it's no big deal!

True repentance is being horrified of our level of disobedience – for taking God's gift of salvation for granted – for despising Christ's work on the cross.

When Jesus began his ministry, he proclaimed, "Repent and believe the good news!"

As we begin to appreciate just what it is that we are to repent of, we can begin to appreciate the Good News that we are to believe. There is no failure, no sin, no disobedience for which Christ did not suffer and die! And that includes our failure to perfectly repent! It would take a perfect person to repent perfectly, but such a person would not need to repent in the first place! But Christ Jesus tells us, as I tell you now:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us all our sins – even our failure to perfectly confess and perfectly repent – and as a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ and by his command and authority, I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sin; in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit!

Amen.