

EPIPHANY 3 A—"Irresistible Repentance"
JANUARY 27, 2008
GLORY OF GOD LC, WHEAT RIDGE
TEXT: MATTHEW 4:12-23

"Our young people are the future of the church."

At least, that's what people keep telling me;
in fact, they've been telling me that ever since I was a young person.

Yes, folks, there was a time when people looked to me
for the future of the church (dark days indeed, eh?).

Well, what do you think—
will our young people hold the future of the people of God in their hands?

Will they have the faith—the courage, the guts—to follow Jesus?

Actually, it seems like they will...at least half of them.

In a study done a couple years ago
by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton,
fifty percent of teens say their faith
is very or even extremely important in their lives.

It helps them make good life choices and helps them feel happy.

Only eight percent say faith isn't important to them at all.

And most of them—seventy percent of them—
said their congregations are very good
or at least fairly good places
to talk about serious life issues.

On the other hand, exactly what these teenagers believe about God
doesn't exactly mesh with what Christianity teaches.

Smith and Lundquist say you might better call it
"Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."

Deism—because they do believe there is a God
who created the world and watches over it.

Moralistic—because what they picked up from us is that God
wants them to be good, to be nice to each other, well-behaved in public.

And *therapeutic* because, basically, they believe
that the ultimate goal of life is to be happy,
and although it's important to stay on God's good side,
God doesn't need to be particularly involved in your life
unless you've gotten yourself into a situation that's
sort of 'beyond your maturity level to handle.'

(Soul "Searching: *The Religious & Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford Press, 2005)

Oddly enough, I don't know of any studies to prove it,
but I suspect their elders believe pretty much the same thing.

But the faith of Jesus is nothing like that:

Jesus called people to live righteously, but he was not moralistic.

He healed the sick and showed compassion to the poor,
but his message was anything but therapeutic.

And his faith in God was as demanding as it was life-giving.

One of my favorite lines in theatre is from Langford Wilson's play,
The Hot L Baltimore, where the girl in the play says,
"I don't think it matters what someone believes in.
I just think it's really chicken not to believe in anything!"

What do you believe in?

Is it important enough to you
that you would leave everything else behind
—your job, your family, even your stuff—
to answer a call from God?

How do you find that kind of God?

This God who created the world and everything in it,
 this King of the Universe and Lord of the Cosmos—
 how do you make Almighty God a part of your personal life?

How do you get close to something as big as God?

Here's how:

Jesus said, **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**

And maybe you heard that word, **repent**,
 and immediately went to *moralistic*;
 I gotta be good, I've got to clean up my life,
 before God will come anywhere near me.

But if you did, you missed the whole beautiful point that follows:
 According to Jesus, the only reason to even bother with repentance
 is the amazing fact that in Jesus
 God has already made the move to get close to you,
 and now he's closer to you than you know.

Repent...for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

God is looking for you;
 God has come close to you;
 you are living in the presence of God.

**The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
 and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.**

Matthew wants you to know that Jesus left his home in Nazareth behind
 and moved to **Capernaum**, to **Galilee of the Gentiles**,
 to this God-forsaken place
 where any young man with a future
 was sure to see his dreams die in obscurity—
 because he was looking for you.

John the Baptist shouted in the wilderness,
 Jesus Christ shouts in the dark—
 brings light to those who live in the dark
 and haven't got a clue how to turn their lives around
 or what direction to go to find God in their lives.

Jesus doesn't start with people who have it all together;
 his first choice is people in trouble,
 far from God, stumbling in the dark.

That's the first thing about repentance:
 repentance is admitting that we are in the dark about God;
 it's opening your eyes to the possibility of light,
 the possibility that your darkness might not be
 as hopelessly dark as you thought—not to God!

When Jesus calls you to repentance
 it's an opportunity and a gift,
 God finding you in the dark and offering you a way out.

Matthew warned us about this Jesus,
 when God told his unwitting father Joseph
 **you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people
 from their sins...and they shall name him Emmanuel,
 which means, 'God is with us.'**

Not God out there someplace, waiting for you to come to him,
 but **God with us**—
 God on the loose, God coming after you.

But how close do you really want God to get?

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

It is such a stark, short story!

There are no miracles, no show, no impressive deeds of power;
 healings and wonders and miracles are relegated to the sidelines,
 as if they didn't even matter,
 as if the only thing that mattered was
 Jesus' "irresistible authority" and our "radical obedience."
 (Douglas R. A. Hare)

Jesus says **Follow me!**
 and there's nothing they can do,
 nothing they want to do,
 except get up and follow him.

Nobody says, "What for?"

Nobody says, "Why? What do you want? Where are you going?
 Well, let me think about it.
 I'll ask my mother. I'll talk it over with dad.
 We'll get back to you."

It doesn't say, "and pretty soon, they left...
 when they'd finished their work....
 when they'd had a chance to think it over."

He said to them, "Follow me"...
[and] immediately they left [everything] and followed him.

When God gets close to you and whispers in your ear and calls you
 it's powerful;
 it might be irresistible,
 it's costly,
 it might lead you to do things you never knew you wanted to do.

Jesus authority is irresistible.

That's the faith of Jesus: it involves leaving something behind.

Maybe not your boats or job or your family;
 maybe just everything you ever knew,
 maybe just the way you had always looked at things,
 maybe just the stuff you wished for and never really anyway,
 or maybe just all the stuff that gets in the way
 of following Jesus wherever he's going.

It might be your greatest happiness,
 but the truth is, faith in Jesus is dangerous.

You can't toy with it;
 you risk everything when you follow Jesus;
 your whole world view could change—*will change!*

You will change...because repentance is change.

You want to get close to God?

Then you will need to keep moving in order to keep up
 with where God is going next and what God is doing next.

Unwrap the gift of repentance,
 and you will find that you can't stay in the same place.

You can't hold God at a distance,
 not particularly involved in your life until you really need him,
 as if, if you're good enough and well-behaved in public,
 God will leave you alone
 until a problem comes up you can't handle.

Jesus is here,
 and he's looking for disciples
 who will follow him and work with him.

That's how seriously God takes you;
 so seriously
 he would take you on as a co-worker and a disciple.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

And the disciples went with him,
 not knowing where they were going or what would happen next,
 doing their best but generally getting it wrong,
 but growing and changing and finding God all the same.

And really, what other option is there?

The only other option is stay there,
 stay where you are and change nothing about your life,
 grow this far and no further.

You get used to the light, or you settle for the dark.

But Jesus keeps on moving, keeps coming on.

And what you find is, it's a gift just to follow and keep up as best you can.

It is all grace:

The grace of a Jesus who leaves home to come looking for you.

The grace of an authority so compelling, so sweet you can't resist it.

The grace of a repentance you would never have chosen,
 but that somehow chose you.

The grace of Wisdom seeking you, not you seeking wisdom.

“You are trifling with the subject,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said.

If you believe, take the first step, it leads to Jesus Christ.

If you don't believe, take the first step all the same,
for you are bidden to take it.

No one wants to know about your faith or unbelief,
your orders are to perform the act of obedience on the spot.

Then you will find yourself in the situation
where faith becomes possible
and where faith exists in the true sense of the word.

(The Cost of Discipleship, p.73)

The question is not what you are willing to do, but—what will you do?

What will become of you?

What could your life become?

If it happened (again) today (to you);

if Jesus Christ walks by and calls you to follow,
and you found it irresistible,

and in spite of yourself, you followed him—

would you become you,

really, truly, *you?*

Amen.