

Matthew 4:12-25
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 25, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

John the Forerunner had reached the apex of his purpose. We considered that last week, as we meditated upon his culminating proclamation: "Behold, the Lamb of God!" Now, by his own testimony, it is time for him to decrease and for the Christ who has arrived to increase. And so, when Jesus hears that John is arrested, you might be surprised to surprise that he *withdraws* (not *retreats*, as if out of fear, neither as if a retreat of leisure and rest), but he withdraws *geographically* up north into Capernaum, a city on the border shared by the old tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Why does Jesus go *there*? Why does he deem it so important to fulfill that sort of obscure prophetic word that we heard in Isaiah? Is it just to check off another prophetic box? No, it is to give sinners hope.

You see, in 2 Kings 15, we hear that Zebulun and Naphtali were the first two areas / tribes overthrown and depopulated as the Assyrians began their conquest of Israel. In the generations before the Christ came, this region (*formerly* Zebulun and Naphtali) had

become filled with other cultures, so that it now is dubbed by the Scriptures – no longer Zebulun and Nephtali, tribes of *Israel* – instead, ‘Galilee of *the Gentiles*’; its spiritual condition was that of utter darkness. It has totally forgotten its God. But its God has not forgotten that this area was the first to fall into darkness. So, Jesus goes to these areas longest sitting in the shadow of death, and he brings *first to them* His Light and life. Indeed,

“The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.”

And, thus, the Scriptures are fulfilled, and the anticipation of the long-awaited Christ finally coming onto the scene is now met and answered, that – as Isaiah prophecies – “You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, [or] as [in joy] when they divide the spoil.”

Yes, all who sit in darkness have reason for great joy when Christ chases away their shadows of death with His light of life. As the gospel account says, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” And that life was to be given and sacrificed – “Behold, the Lamb of God” – that it might be shared with and proclaimed to His redeemed. Consider: our Introit for this morning is comprised of the final verses of the 22nd psalm... the psalm that begins, “My God, my God why have you forsaken Me?” ... the psalm of Christ on the cross. He went to the cross for the *joy* set before him, so that “I will tell of

your name to my brothers”... indeed, more than that, that “posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it!”

And if that proclamation goes forth as the universal gospel, such is captured in Jesus’ own preaching, “Repent, for *the kingdom of heaven* is at hand.” Certainly, He preaches more than that one sentence, but that one sentence summarizes and captures his whole salvific message.

I mentioned to the confirmands just this past Wednesday that, as they get better at hearing Law and Gospel in a sermon, they may learn to summarize the whole sermon in one sentence of Law and Gospel, that they may remember and carry that one sentence with them all week. Well, here is the one sentence that summarizes Jesus’ preaching: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” That should sound familiar to you, because it’s the same summary as what John the Forerunner preached. There’s a continuation between Forerunner and Fulfillment, even between Old Testament and New Testament (not *competing*, but *continuing!*), between gospel promised and gospel incarnate that we ought not only recognize, but cherish. God’s Word has never changed; from the moment of Eden’s fall, His promises have never wavered. There’s been no change-order in His plans. John can precede the Christ, preparing people with the very same Truth that Christ himself fulfills... the very same preaching

of the very same Law and Gospel that Christ himself preaches. And, to bring light and life and joy to those in the darkness of death, this one sentence summarizes it all: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

And if it is, why are your ears so irritated, your conscience so defensive, about that word “Repent”? Think those: do those who are by birth and nature alienated from God, separated from Him by their sins, dwelling in the grave, constantly aware of the coming of death and condemnation... do they really want to remain there? “I’m not repenting; I’m going to remain here!” Don’t they rejoice that something far better is at hand – the kingdom of heaven, light and life, the incarnate Christ and, with Him, all God’s promises of salvation... so that to be called to repent and despair of one’s current state *should* bring the greatest joy:

‘The Lord has not forgotten and forsaken me, as I deserve. He has not left me in eternal dying, eternal bondage. He is not leaving my camp depopulated and desolate. He is calling me out of darkness, out of the shadows of death, into His life and light... and He is doing so based on the righteousness and merit of the Chosen One, the Christ, who is my salvation... the very One who indeed is proclaiming this good news.’

Indeed, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” If that is the summary of Jesus’ preaching to Zebulun and Naphtali... those who first- and longest-of-Israel dwelt in darkness, then it’s certainly also the summary of Jesus’ preaching *to you*... you who would be more

culturally/spiritually akin to the resulting “Galilee of *the Gentiles*.” That’s us, isn’t it? Yes, the same preaching is for *your* ears and for *your* heart to rejoice in.

Is it coincidence that the text immediately turns to Jesus choosing servants – not merely men to be followers – but to be fishers of men. *Future* fishers of men, not *present* fishers of men: “I *will* make you fishers of men.” Jesus called them not to fish for men merely in Galilee, but to fish for men throughout the world and through all generations. Consider that, throughout all Galilee and even Syria, the text says, Jesus fame spread just fine without attributing anything to Simon and Andrew, James and John. Indeed, the text says, “great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” That wasn’t Peter’s, James’, John’s doing. He didn’t call them to fish for *those* men.

He called them to fish for *you*. You probably know the apostles’ names better than any of those crowds did! And you certainly know their gospel accounts and their epistles and even the simple confession of Andrew (as we heard it last week: “We have found the Messiah”) in a way those crowds never knew or even heard! Indeed, Christ made those men to be fishers of men that they may benefit *you*.

In fact, no place is that more beautifully demonstrated than in Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer. On that night when he was betrayed,

He prayed to the Father, *first*, for those whom he had called to be fishers of men – His apostles, those He was sending forth... and, in that prayer, we hear Jesus say repeatedly that He had given them the Father's Word... that same Word of promise from Eden, that same Word preached by the forerunner, that same Word enfleshed in Jesus Himself and which He therefore would also proclaim... that same Word He gave to His apostles, so that He prays to the Father:

"I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you." And again, He prays, **"I have given them your word,** and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." And again, He prays, "Sanctify them in your truth. **Your Word** is truth. As you sent me into the world, so **I have sent them** into the world." And *then*, Jesus prays, "I do not ask for these only, but also for **those who will believe in me through their word.**" Notice that, Jesus prayed for you, you who will be 'caught up into life' by those men whom Christ sent to fish with His Word of Light and Life.

So, just as we hear the continuous, never-changing Word of God synchronously proclaimed by John and Jesus – just as we hear *that* preaching summarized, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" – should we not expect that the faithful preaching to you and to this generation can be summarized with the exact same sentence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Which means, you can't be afraid of or offended by that word "Repent." It is a word of rescue... a word that says *more* than "help is on the way." It says, "Prepare your heart, for rescue is here. Despair of the darkness you have always known, the death in which you have just lingered and dwelt and even attempted to justify yourself and make yourself comfortable in!... Say goodbye and good riddance to it all; for Christ is on the scene to bring you into light and life." Such is not merely a one-time call, a one-time preaching, with a one-time summary that is never again relevant to daily life... instead, *always* keep that summary statement of the Word of Truth in your ears and heart. For, the light and life of Christ is for the Christian just as much for those still in darkness. In fact, St Paul said to the *Christians* of Ephesus: "Once you were darkness; but now you are light in the world. Walk as children of light."

In other words, "Repent of darkness; walk as children of light." Indeed, the whole Christian life lives and breathes the faith, hope, and joy that springs forth in the preaching of John, of Jesus, of the apostles, and of those who preach the same Word of Truth today. You could say, the preaching 'springs eternal': "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Of course, there's one more image of this gospel text we have not yet considered. And that is the image of the fullness of Jesus' ministry:

“He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics; and he healed them.”

We ought consider this in two ways: first, the historical record that the Christ came onto the scene, made himself known by his preaching and by his miracles. Remember, we heard not too long ago that Jesus pointed John’s disciples to the miracles to show them the Old Testament was being fulfilled and that He indeed was the Christ. That is the true purpose of those miracles recorded by those gospels... that’s the true purpose, lest the hearer today lament and despair that he is not healed the same way and, thus, convince himself he has less of the gospel. The miracles served one purpose – to make known that this indeed was the Lamb of God – the Christ was on the earth! – that Lamb of God who would take into himself not only their illness and affliction, but the far greater enemy of sin and death – and He would conquer it all, as promised in that summary preaching: “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

When considering this historical record of Christ on the scene, notice how impossible is the charge of those cynical about the trustworthiness of the history of this report... those who believe that such things were simply made up by over-zealous followers of some good rabbi, and his miracles were merely figments of their

imagination and didn't actually happen. No, the text says, his fame spread not just throughout Judea, but also beyond the Jordan, and also Galilee and Decapolis (both 'of the Gentiles'), and even throughout Syria... so that, when the records and accounts were written by the evangelists and when those historical documents were circulated far and wide, no shortage of witnesses could attest to their veracity.

Now, we may also think of this another way... a second way important for us – that, with His preaching, Jesus gave accompanying signs and miracles. And if his preaching was not just for *them*, and if he called fishers of men not for *them* but for *you*, then *you* can likewise rejoice that He accompanies His preaching with miracles. Indeed, greater miracles – for the miracles He gives you today are not to make the Christ's *earthly* life known (as the miracles were given then), but is to make His Church's *eternal* life known... indeed, more than *known* through signs, but to make His Church's eternal life *received* through sacraments... that Christ still today is come in flesh and blood upon the earth, still bringing light to those in darkness and sharing His life with those formerly in death... still *bringing* His earned redemption to His Israel, the Church, the new Israel now full of former gentiles... that just as the gentiles of Zebulun and Naphtali had a share in his light and life, so you former gentiles also share in his light and life.

Thus, with great joy and a rejoicing as at the full of the harvest, Isaiah says, hear that summary proclamation of the Gospel, and live in the light of Christ: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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January 25, 2026