THIRD SUNDAY OF EPIPANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

January 24, 2021

*“The Hill We Climb”*

The passage we just heard is an important part of Scripture for us to hear today because it asks us to come to seriously consider who, and *whose* we are, what we believe in, *who* we believe in, and how all of this will shape our lives.

Of course, Scripture always asks this of us. Indeed, the older language of the church tells us that Scripture *convicts* us, that is: it makes us face-up to who we are verses who we *say* we are or want to be.

Scripture also asks us to come to grips with the challenges we are facing. It asks us to acknowledge how are the trials of life are guiding our actions; on what, and in whom, are we placing our faith, and how is this impacting how we are living our lives.

In the passage we just heard, Jesus answers all of these questions and he does it so quickly and decisively that we almost do not notice. Mostly, what we notice about Mark 1:14-20, is that Jesus calls men from their every day lives into discipleship and ministry. We remember Jesus’ wonderful play on words when he tells Simon and his brother Andrew—the fishermen—that he will make them “fishers of men.”

We also listen with wonder, and perhaps a touch of self-reproach, as Simon, Andrew, but also James, and John all drop everything they are doing, and they follow Jesus.

Just like that! No discussion. No pondering whether it is the right or the wrong thing to do. They just go.

We hear this story and we marvel at their sacrifice. We may even wonder how they could make up their minds so quickly, and so decisively leave everything behind, everything they owned, all their other hopes, dreams, and priorities, and even every other relationship they may have had.

I do not know if we still give a lot of thought to the enormity of their decision to make every other concern or being second to their calling. However, there is another dimension to this passage to which I would like to draw our attention.

What I would like us to notice is that even before he went in search of the disciples, before he called them to leave their nets and come away with him, Jesus came into Jerusalem on his own. He was by himself. Mark says, he came, *“proclaiming the good news* *of God, 15and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’*” [vs.14b,15].

There are those of you who hear these particular words and will be immediately reminded of someone else in Jesus’ story—John, yes, Jesus sounds (here) like John the Baptist. But here’s the thing: in the very first part of verse 14, we are told that Jesus came from Galilee *after* John had been arrested.

As we will find out later in this gospel, in chapter six, John the Baptist was arrested and executed by Herod. The way Mark has written this sentence in chapter one suggests that Jesus already knows what has happened to him. He knows that John has been arrested. Although he may not yet know if John is dead or alive, Jesus knows what this means for John’s chances of living.

Jesus knows all of this. However, rather than letting this change his resolve to follow through on the promise of his baptism, Jesus continues on, he goes ahead. He even continues-on with the same message of repentance that John had been proclaiming.

Jesus, of course, goes further than John. He joins this message of repentance with the assurance that “the kingdom of God has come near.”

So, repentance is not reserved exclusively for a time or life *after* this life. It is also not only an unburdening of the spirit so that the heart and conscience will be lighter—it is not only an end in itself.

Repentance is necessary because the realm of God’s power and provision is *now*, it is in our midst. So, to repent is to prepare ourselves to receive the good news of God *here and now*—this, *repentance*—is the prerequisite before the kin-dom can be received and experienced.

It is a prerequisite before we can be reconciled to God. Without repentance we make ourselves incapable of entering into reconciliation and relationship with God.

Make no mistake: God is always with us offering us grace and true communion, but if cannot or *will* not repent—if we cannot or will not tell the truth about ourselves—then the relationship we want with God is not possible because any deep or true relationship we can have must always be built on a foundation of honesty if it is to last and to grow.

When it comes to our relationship with God: we can only grow in our faith if we are willing to come to God in humility, owning-up to who we are. This is an important part of repentance. Only then can we begin the journey toward God who has made us and waits for us.

Repentance—telling the truth to ourselves and God, so that God can help us to begin again. This is what allows God to draw near to us. This is the opportunity Jesus brought to the world in the most startlingly real and intimate way we have ever known.

He is Emmanuel, God who has drawn close to us so that we might draw close to him.

God who knows the joys and sorrows of human living—knows even the aches and pains that are a part of life, but who especially knows the enormity of joy and power we are offered in the person of Christ and the relationship with us he offers—life, *new* life, life everlasting.

A life that will always have dignity and worth—no matter what earthly life throws at us.

A life free of fear—nothing can shake us when we are a part of the body of Christ.

A life filled with compassion for others, and for our own lives because we know that whatever happens, our relationship with God is still whole because that is who God is—all wholeness and strength—all love.

I knew several weeks ago that I wanted to preach on this particular passage. However, I thought I was going to talk about the disciples and their swift and decisive response to Jesus’ call to follow.

However, as I was working on this sermon, I was also watching the inauguration of our new president. To be honest, I do not always watch the swearing-in of a new president. It is usually in the middle of the week or at least in the middle of the day while I am getting ready to go to the church to begin my day. However, after the tumultuous few months and weeks we have had, I decided I wanted to see how this inauguration was going to unfold—it also helped that we were going to have a *woman* in the second highest seat of power in our country. Of note is that she is also of non-white, mixed racial heritage.

*This* is history!

Of course, both President Biden and Vice President Harris come into office at a particularly difficult time in our history. Racial bigotry, ideological division, hatred, and violent unrest have been part and parcel of our recent national story.

While we knew that all of these things had not vanished from our public lives, but had continued to simmer just beneath the surface of our collective life, many of us still believed we had made real and lasting progress. We believed we were going to continue to forge ahead—*together*—toward the goal of equality, relationship, strength, courage, and justice.

Thus, it has been really dispiriting to realize and to find that the change and hope many of us have cultivated and cared for, prayed for, and worked for has been little more than a thin veneer, so fragile in many places that we almost lost it, and are now faced with the arduous task of repairing and rebuilding it.

We are, once again, at a crossroads—and what we do next will tell us whether the American experiment will hold and grow stronger, or whether it will break, and be lost to the chaos of lesser, indeed, venal ambitions.

So, there is also, I believe, a particular poignancy about this particular moment in our history.

So, as I was trying to finish this sermon, *and* listening to the inauguration, I began to hear the gospel echoing in many of the thoughts, words, and sentiments I was hearing in the speeches that were being given.

President Biden set the stage. Like all politicians, he listed some of his hopes for his tenure in office. However, in real and honest terms, he also talked about the challenges we face. And then he invited us to be a part of the solution. Indeed, he called us to action, to sacrifice— and not just for ourselves, but for a good that encompasses far more than ourselves and our country, far more than nationalism—rather, for a *common* good that can touch *all* people.

What he began in his speech was then picked-up and turned into epic and poetry by the nation's first Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman, who recited her work, *The Hill We Climb.*

What I heard in Ms. Gorman’s poem was Jesus’ gospel call to repentance and truth, and the power this gives us. I heard a call to honesty about who we have been as a people. And I heard her describe who we *can* be, who we were made to be if we, too, can only step out, and step up.

In the church, we embrace Christ’s call to discipleship *based* on this kind of truth and *repentance*. Through these things is the way to deep and profound reconciliation and relationship with each other, but especially, with God. This was Jesus’ message to the world as he began his ministry. It is his message to us now, too—repent, for the kingdom of God has come near. Or as Ms. Gorman put this:

*5This is the era of just redemption.*

*We feared it at its inception.*

*We did not feel prepared to be*

*the heirs of such a terrifying hour,*

*but within it, we found the power*

*to author a new chapter,*

*to offer hope and laughter*

*to ourselves so while once we asked,*

*how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?*

*Now we assert,*

*how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?*

*We will not march back to what was,*

*but move to what shall be a country*

*that is bruised, but whole,*

*benevolent, but bold,*

*fierce, and free.*

*We will not be turned around*

*or interrupted by intimidation*

*because we know*

*our inaction and inertia*

*will be the inheritance of*

*the next generation.*

*Our blunders become*

*their burdens.*

*But one thing is certain,*

*if we merge mercy with might*

*and might with right,*

*then love becomes our legacy*

*and change our children’s birthright.*

To which I will only add: Amen.