

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for January 22, 2012 ~ Epiphany 3b
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It seems that people are always willing to listen to someone who has some good news. During the gold rush of 1849, an itinerant preacher who had gone out to San Francisco was having trouble getting a crowd to which he could preach. One day, he had an idea. He took a wooden crate, walked out into the middle of a muddy intersection, and shouted at the top of his lungs, "I have good news for you this morning!" In minutes, there were more than one hundred people standing before him, listening to the good news of the kingdom. Ears perk up when someone has good news to share.

If you were a fisherman, in a long line of fishermen, going about your common, mundane task of casting your nets, hauling them in, and casting them out again – over and over, you too might be so excited by some good news that you'd be willing to drop what you were doing, wave goodbye to your father, and run off with the bearer of that good news. That's what they did when Jesus came walking by. They could see in Jesus something they wanted to see in themselves. There was something magnetic and powerful and authentic in his very being. AND, he had good news: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. . . Follow me and I will make you fish for people." They left their nets and followed him.

But wait a minute. A message calling us to repentance doesn't sound like such good news. We've all seen the road signs and heard the t.v. preachers shouting about it. The idea seems repulsive to sophisticated people like us, Episcopalians. If you have to preach about it, couldn't you at least wait until Lent?

It is true that repentance in the moralistic way we have come to think of it is a kind of repulsive word. Yet, when we examine the word Jesus used and from the perspective of those first disciples, we see an entirely different meaning. When Jesus says, "Repent," he means *turn, change your perspective, try a different direction.*

Those fishermen, whose boats must have been propelled by the wind in the sails, would have known that the key to getting from one place to another by water was knowing how to tack. When we sail, in order to catch the wind and stay on course, from time to time the sails must be shifted and the direction of the vessel slightly changed. That procedure is known as "tacking." So, to try a different tack is to change directions in order to move on toward one's ultimate goal. The most skilled sailor knows how to judge when it is time for such a change. Jesus was saying, "It is time to try a new tack." Turn, change directions, come with me along a new way and I will bring enrichment to your lives and help you and others reach your God-given goals.

That message, which we call "The Gospel" has spread around the globe and those who have heard it, repented, believed in it, and had their lives transformed by it have in countless ways shared it with others. The good news is an invitation to turn away from something old, dying, or dead, and to turn toward something that is filled with life, like the nets of those fishermen. It is an invitation to turn from sin to righteousness, which means the goodness that comes to us as the result of believing and following Jesus in what those early Christians called "The Way." To believe does not mean to become attached to certain prescribed truths. Jesus didn't say, "Come and I will give you a theologi-

cal system to investigate; I have certain theories I would like for you to think over; I have an ethical system I would like to discuss with you.” He said, “Follow me.” It all began with a personal response to trust him. To turn and believe means to become personally attached to this Jesus and follow in his way. It is to go with him in that way and usually his way turns out to be the most direct way.

For almost two years, the members of this church have been asked to do something like this in a particular way. From the time your former rector announced his intention to retire, you have been called again and again to a form of repentance – transition. You’ve been asked to let go of one rector and the way things functioned under his leadership. You’ve been invited to get acquainted with an interim rector, who has a different personality and different ways of approaching things. Not necessarily better, just different. Now, this very morning, you are going to be asked to embrace a new rector, with yet a different personality and a different approach to things. It’s time to tack! It’s time to shift directions so you can continue to move toward toward the ultimate goal of the mission Christ has entrusted to you.

Jesus stands in our midst this morning. He sees us doing what we do. He also sees the future into which his mission needs to take us. And he says to the people of Good Shepherd the same words he said to those fisher folk long ago in Galilee, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Follow him. Follow him into a relationship with a new rector. Follow him into a new era of ministry and mission. Cherish what has been, but do not let what has been hold you back or deter you from engagement with something wonder-filled that will be life transforming. The Kingdom of God has come near. You’ve believed and seen it with your own eyes. I’ve seen what God can do with you when you open yourselves to the promise of fresh possibilities. God isn’t finished revealing things. The best is yet to be as you turn into a new era of discipleship with your new rector.