

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Sexagesima Sunday, February 7, 2010

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Hymns: 16, 498: 1-3, 331, 324: 5-8, 510.

Lessons: Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Luke 4:14-32.

Text: Matthew 4: 12-17.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

As a forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist preached repentance. Our text begins with the words that John had been thrown into prison. When the mouth of this faithful witness, John, had been silenced, Jesus knew that the time had come for Him openly to enter upon His work as prophet. His ministry in Galilee began when the Baptist's came to an end. Although Matthew's gospel is not chronological, we see that he makes the message of John and Jesus about repentance the connection that ties those two together.

Repentance is part of our lives, too. We all are guilty of many, many sins daily and deserve nothing but everlasting shame and punishment in hell. But Jesus, our loving Savior, has taken all our sins upon himself and paid for them in full by his work of redemption. He did this to fulfill the scriptures. Today let's look briefly at an important part of Jesus' life and another Old Testament prophecy and see

JESUS' LIFE AND WORDS FULFILL THE WORDS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. Jesus *"went and lived in Capernaum ... to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah"*.
2. *"From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'"*

In Jesus Christ we find fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. This is one such prophecy. We read that when Jesus heard that John the Baptist was thrown into prison by king Herod, *"Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali – to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah."*

The unpleasant reception in his home town of Nazareth, as you heard in our Gospel lesson today, caused Him to make His stay there very brief. Matthew speaks of him making His home in Capernaum. Capernaum shows up throughout the gospel histories as the center of what has been called our Lord's Galilean ministry. It was a thriving city on the Sea of Galilee, on the great road from Damascus to the Mediterranean Sea.

Matthew names this city of Capernaum and makes another reference to Old Testament prophecy. He writes that this was done by Jesus *"to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles...'"*

In our Old Testament lesson today you heard this prophecy. This area in which the descendants of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, also called the region of Galilee – from the Mediterranean Sea to the East side of the Jordan river – is an area that suffered great tribulation before the Messiah came. We read in 2 Kings 15:29: *"In the time of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and took Ijon, Abel Beth Maacah, Janoah, Kedesh and Hazor."* – these are all cities in Zebulun and Naphtali – *"He took Gilead and Galilee, including all the land of Naphtali, and deported the people to Assyria."*

But when Jesus the Messiah did come, he spent a great deal of time there. Jesus sought their repentance as Matthew notes *"From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'"*

In our Old Testament lesson you heard that ***“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”*** Isaiah speaks as if it has actually happened, when he is speaking of the Messiah – Jesus Christ – coming about 700 years later! The inhabitants of this area, sometimes called ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’, had been oppressed with spiritual darkness. Isaiah the prophet, speaking as the mouthpiece of the eternal and omniscient God, looks at the time when the Messiah would come as if he was present even when Isaiah was writing, for so certain is the fulfillment of God’s promise: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, in the darkness of paganism, upon them the light has shined, namely, the light of salvation, of the wonderful spiritual blessings of the Savior. As Matthew shows in our sermon text, this prophecy was literally fulfilled during the Galilean ministry of Jesus, when He made Capernaum his headquarters and from there set out on His journeys, not only throughout Galilee, but also into the country east of Jordan.

Darkness symbolizes wickedness, ignorance, and unbelief. Most of the people did not know the way of salvation. But then Jesus, the light of the world, came to Galilee. He proclaimed the saving truth throughout that land. Crowds followed him, and they heard him preach and saw him perform miracles.

But most importantly, they heard the gospel. It is the gospel which saves us. The Law can only show our sinfulness and the fact that we cannot save ourselves. When Jesus came and preached, it is really true that the people who sat in darkness saw great light. What Isaiah had written in our Old Testament lesson found its fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus in this region.

This is the place where the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had settled. Their country lay towards or alongside of the sea; it was a place where the children of Israel ended up mixing with the pagans. It was a border area, mainly from the west side of the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Of this mixed population of Jews and Gentiles, in the midst of whom the Greek rulers had founded new cities with heathen customs and institutions, the evangelist Matthew says, in applying the words of the prophet, that they sat in darkness. The spiritual condition of the people represented an increase in religious blindness even greater than the time of Isaiah, nearly 700 years earlier. And Matthew repeats the verb "sat." Theirs was an indifferent, sluggish attitude. One writer said: The shadow of spiritual death had surrounded them. It effectually shut out the light of life streaming from the Old Testament prophecies. But now "Jesus Christ, the true Light, shone forth in the beauty of holiness and truth. Christ began His ministry in Galilee and frequented this uncultivated place more than He did Jerusalem and other parts of Judea. Here His preaching was especially needful, and by this was the prophecy fulfilled."

“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’” This was the same message that John the Baptist proclaimed: Repent! It is an appeal for a change of heart. Jesus must preach repentance in order to prepare the way for the proclamation of salvation. The sweetness of the gospel is meaningless unless we recognize the bitter taste of our sins, shown us by the Law of God. Jesus acted, not as a guide to a distant and coming salvation, but as the herald of the kingdom of grace now at hand in Himself. His plea was for a change from the old to the new, from the prophecy of future promises to the fulfillment. In this way the day-star arose in Christ and His Gospel, and had now begun to shine upon those that were covered with darkness, in order that they might see this light and rejoice in its merciful illumination and warmth.

Repentance implies a radical change of heart and mind, followed by a corresponding change in behavior. Jesus’ call to repentance was an invitation as well as a command. No one can respond positively to that invitation unless the Holy Spirit works such a response through the power of the Gospel. To repent and believe the gospel is not a decision anyone can make on his or her own.

You learned about this work of the Holy Spirit, perhaps long after you were baptized, in the words you learned from Luther's explanation of the third commandment: *I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers.* Many have had the special blessing that you were called by the Holy Ghost at your baptism.

Jesus later had harsh things to say about the Galileans because they did not repent, they did not turn away from their sins and did not believe the Gospel. The enthusiasm of the Galileans for following Jesus didn't last long. Many deserted Jesus when they learned that he was unwilling to be the kind of Messiah they wanted. Finally Jesus pronounced a damning verdict over the people of Capernaum, recorded in Matthew 11:20-24: ***"Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.'"***

Scholars tell us that in fulfillment of Christ's prophecy this thriving city was later so utterly destroyed that its very site in a region of ruined towns was unknown for hundreds of years. Sodom was synonymous with wickedness, but Jesus said Capernaum deserved a fate worse than the destruction that Sodom and Gomorrah experienced as recorded in Genesis 19. Their opportunities to know the Savior were greater, for the Messiah was bodily present among them and taught in their synagogues and in their streets. That made their guilt in rejecting Christ all the greater and all the more inexcusable. Surely we can find a warning for ourselves in that picture!

How about an application to our lives? We repented once, when we were brought to faith through our baptism – perhaps through the words of sponsors at our baptism, so why or how does this apply to us? Isn't this appeal to repentance for the gross sinners of the world? Yes, it surely is, but it also has application to every child of God. We learn about daily contrition and repentance in "Baptism, Fourth: **WHAT DOES THIS BAPTIZING WITH WATER MEAN?** *It means that our Old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise, as from the dead, to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever. Where is this written?* St. Paul says in Romans, chapter 6, *"We were buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."*

Contrition is sincere sorrow for our sins. Repentance in a narrow sense is faith in the forgiveness of sins. Repentance in a broad sense is being sorry for our sins, and having faith in the forgiveness of sins, and seeking to live a God-pleasing life and doing everything our God commands of us. Perhaps one of the times we are most mindful of that is when we publicly join in confessing our sins before we take communion. But it can and should be a part of our daily lives, and not just on communion Sundays. Perhaps you also think of the words of Luther's evening prayer, said after a day of fighting with the Devil, the world, our flesh and often losing repeatedly: "I pray thee that thou wouldst forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong and graciously keep me this night."

And we could do worse than closing our sermon with the rest of Luther's words in that evening prayer: Lord, graciously keep me this day and "keep me this night. For into thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let thy holy angel be with me that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen."