

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today the teaching or revelation of Christ, the only Son of God is marked in time with the arrest of John. We hear this in the opening of the Gospel reading:

Now after the arrest of John...(Mark 1:14a)

This may not sound like much to us here today because this term “arrest” is quite common for us. When we hear that John is arrested, we understand this to mean that legal authority has seized John and taken him into custody...and that’s it. And we all know this about John...but this arrest of John gets glossed over quickly because of our understanding of the term “arrest” and more specifically our familiarity with John’s arrest. But there is a much more intentional and a much more ominous contrast being presented to us today in the opening of this Gospel lesson. The Greek term, *παραδίδωμι* to *παραδοθῆναι* used in this opening is parsed out as “arrested.” However, for me, what makes this opening much more ominous and gives us a fuller sense of the dynamic that is taking place is to understand that John is NOT simply arrested. The verb being used here tells us that he was either handed over to death or delivered to death. I define and parse this term out this way because it is the exact same verb used when Jesus is handed over to death or delivered to death.

I make this point about the opening of our Gospel because of the menacing news of John being handed over to death stands right next to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Listen again to the opening line of this Gospel lesson:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,<sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14-15)

But notice also that the one who brings the Good News and *IS* himself, the Good News...repeats the very familiar and similar words used by John concerning repentance. Not only does repentance connect John and Jesus, but they are linked together in death. So, without directly mentioning it, death seems to lurk not only with the Good News it goes with repentance as well.

This is all within the opening chapter to this Gospel and from the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, as well as the Good News is all set before us in the shadow of the cross and or, it is all shrouded in death.<sup>1</sup>

Strangely, just a few weeks ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ and now we are in a season when we celebrate the revelation of Jesus Christ known as the time after the Epiphany. It is a time in our liturgical year when we celebrate the light of Christ that reaches into every single corner of our darkened world. And so it is with us here today, each of us gathered here in this place in some way or another have experienced the light of Christ shining upon us, BUT we too gather in the shadow of the cross. But does that light shine only or exclusively on us?

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<sup>1</sup> The linking together of John and Jesus under the shadow of the cross is an idea presented by Dr Stephen Hultgren. Dr. Hultgren is Lecturer in New Testament at Australian Lutheran College – University of Divinity, in Adelaide, Australia. Dr Hultgren’s commentary on Mark 1:14-20 was first presented in 2009 and can be found on the web site, *The Working Preacher*, a resource presented to the whole church Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

I think I can safely say that we all know that the light of Christ is not exclusively ours nor does it shine only on us. What makes the light exclusive is our attitude about it. Furthermore, when we take the time to understand the light, we then begin to see that the shadow of cross coming from that light reminds us that our opinions, our prejudices, and our broken-humanness is not part of the light that shines on all, that part is put to death, and despite our human feelings about it, God's light called Jesus Christ shines on all and calls us to turn from our ways. Once again from our Gospel lesson we hear this:

Now after John was (handed over to death), Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14-15)

In this we hear Jesus Christ himself telling us of the Good News under the shadow of death...but he is also calling us to repent, to turn from our old ways, or our ways of understanding. The light of Christ that we celebrate is a gracious light and we all know this, but today that light is also shining on repentance...and this is what is heard throughout our lessons today.

We begin our lesson of repentance today with the story of Jonah, a reluctant servant who tries to run away from God because God is merciful to all, and "all" includes Jonah's enemies...and may it remind us...our enemies too. We all learn as kids this story of Jonah and a large fish or a whale as it is illustrated in all the kids' books, we use to tell the story. But the deeper story line running under Jonah is the account of a man dealing with God and he discovers that God has a deep and abiding concern for every single person, for every single city, for every single nation on the face of the earth and not just those places and people Jonah sees as deserving. Jonah flees from the Lord because he feared and hated the idea of God being merciful to all, including Jonah's enemies. As the story goes, we eventually see Jonah's notion about limiting God's mercy to all dies...one could say Jonah's understanding is then put to death by that cross that lurks in our Gospel reading today, and that...the people of Nineveh repented of their sins.

But a more powerful point to notice in this story is that the God also repented of the evil he had planned for them, listen again:

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:9-10, RSV)

We have in our first reading, "God changed His mind" but this can be parsed out from the Hebrew that God turned, or repented. God turned back; *God repented!*

We hold so firm to our ideals, our understandings, our preconceived notions, and assumptions, and we hold fast to what WE BELIEVE to be the truth, and we will at times refuse to repent, or rather we refuse to CHANGE our minds or anything else. But listen to what is happening here, the Holy One Himself, the very God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the very creator of all that we know and see around us in this world, in this passage finds himself in need of repentance. And so it is that we read here today God "repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it."

But think about it, God did not destroy nor return evil toward the woman caught in adultery, nor to the thief on the cross beside him, nor to the soldiers who crucified him. "Father, forgive them;

for they do not know what they are doing,” is what we hear from the cross, nor does God want to destroy you or me, or even our worst enemy.<sup>2</sup>

The Lord is merciful, always ready to forgive, always ready to wipe the slate clean through the cross of Christ. Yes, the Lord is merciful, but even as we hear and take comfort in that Good News, we know too that an ominous contrast of the cross or death lurks within the stories and the teachings that are set before us each time we gather...that very ominous contrast is the very cross of Jesus Christ that centers us and assures us of the grace and salvation we share in it.

May this cross then continue to put to death the foolishly belief that this God whom we worship is a God who smiles only with favor upon Americans, that God smiles only upon those who sit in the false sense of the safety of a church building along with our own false sense of self-righteousness gained through our assumptions and conclusions about faith and the church.

Today as we turn from our world, or as we repent of our ways, our notions, and our brokenness, we come before the Lord with our hands out and our hearts open, and we can say that “I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become our Lord.” What is it “to become a lord” asks Luther in his Large Catechism? It means that he has redeemed (He has turned us) and released us from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all misfortune on that cross that lurks within us all. Before the Holy Spirit turned us, we had no lord or king, but we were captive under the power of the devil. We were condemned to death and entangled in sin and blindness,<sup>3</sup> but through the Holy Spirit we have been turned toward the cross, that is not death, but new life...new life promised to all...

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> I have “borrowed” portions of a sermon by Pastor Gregory P. Fryer Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY for 1/25/2015, the Third Sunday after Epiphany on Jonah 3:1-10, Mark 1:14-20. Pastor Fryer also preached this sermon at the retreat of the Society of St. Gregory of Nazianzus.

<sup>3</sup> Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2000. Last paragraph is from The Second Article of the Creed, page 434, par 25.