

Sermon – Third Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1: 14-20

In the space of the past two and a half weeks we have witnessed as a nation an attempt at an insurrection on January 6 and the peaceful transfer of power, that the insurrection was trying to stop, last Wednesday. These two defining moments in the nation's history couldn't be more different. Both days defined the President of the United States at the time.

The insurrection began as the final attempt, in a year of attempts, to undermine the democratic process, sow doubt and confusion amongst the populous, and ultimately delegitimize the electoral process itself. On Wednesday January 6, the then President Donald Trump egged on a protest to march on the Capitol and end the certification of the November Presidential election. It was one man's call to arms to support his sole objective to remain in power.

Last Wednesday at the inauguration of President Biden and Vice-President Harris, the nation and the world witnessed the peaceful transfer of power and the call to action to unify, end the uncivil division in the country and rise above our own distrust of each other to build a better country, a more perfect union, as the preamble to the Constitution makes clear.

President Biden was not saying he was the savior of the country, nor was he saying he alone can fix the country. He was calling us all to dig deep into our souls and see that division is death, but unity brings hope for better times.

At every inauguration since the republic was founded, the president has delivered an inaugural address. George Washington's second address in 1793 was the shortest at 135 words. William Harrison's in 1841 was the longest at 1 hour and 45 minutes, delivered apparently without hat or coat in a howling snowstorm. It was more than foolish as he died a month later from pneumonia.

The whole point of the inaugural address is to set the scene and provide a vision for the president's four-year term of office. After a difficult campaign the speech might aim to unite a divided nation. It might offer hope with lofty goals or it might offer only a detailed political agenda. Many speeches have contained memorable lines and most invoked God in some way or other. Often, they looked back to history and then sought to project their ideals forward.

The gospel passage from Mark this morning offers us the first words Jesus spoke in his ministry after surviving the temptation of the evil one. The gospel according to Mark is the earliest written account of Jesus' life and the most succinct. The words Jesus uttered, and Mark recorded, were Jesus' inauguration speech if you like. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." It is short and sweet and delivers the essential nature of Jesus' life purpose.

Jesus confirmed that indeed the ancient prophecies of Isaiah and others had been fulfilled in his birth. The time, the time foretold when God would come amongst God's creation as Emmanuel, God with us. This decisive moment in time had indeed arrived and he was ready to fulfill his calling. Jesus was the incarnation of God, the complete manifestation of God in a human being, flesh and blood, just like you and me.

Jesus calls all people to repent in the manner of John's call to others from the wilderness. Repent was the call, repent for the people had gone astray and moved far from God's lawful creation of justice, peace and love.

Humanity has gone astray countless times since creation first brought humanity to life. Our bible is full of stories of the waywardness of people and the resulting division and conflict their actions imbued. We constantly seek to go our own way and too often ignore what Jesus calls us to be.

Finally, Jesus calls everyone to believe in the good news. Initially, the good news was Jesus physical presence, the fulfillment of scripture and the fulfillment of John's cry from the desert wilderness – "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."

As Jesus' ministry unfolded the good news he was calling people too became more clear. In essence the good news was that God had become manifest in the person Jesus, to show humankind the way to righteousness, the way to right living and the folly of self-centered human endeavor.

Jesus shows people the way and reveals to them the truth of God's call to repentance and faith. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." God did not rely on prophets or angels to get his message to the people, he came down and dwelt among them, lived their life and eventually paid a high price in his early death.

Jesus was anointed to bring the good news to the poor. He was incarnate from God for the specific purpose of taking the good news that was promised in the prophecies of God out into the world. He called men and women to join him and many of them did immediately, recognizing the rightness of his call. The good news was that Jesus was the messiah, the holy one of God, that fulfilled the promise of the Law.

Good news is only good we might say for those living in discomfort. Good news offers hope for a different and better experience than before. We are all fallen people and live with the discomfort of knowing that we sin and fall short of the glory of God. Some can admit the discomfort, however there are many people who are not able to recognize the discomfort they feel in their souls as arising from their own actions.

Either way these people might be understood as the captives. Those trapped in poverty, sickness, and loneliness. They might be physically captive in jails or detention centers,

psychologically captive by cultlike leaders who prey on the vulnerable and lonely, or they might be captive in a home or institution, bullied and abused. Captive people are all around us waiting for good news and for release.

In this moment Jesus was reaching back into history, indicating the link that he had to the prophecy of God, and then firmly anchoring himself in the present by declaring that the prophecy had been fulfilled. His ministry was the future as well and he would go on to live out his promise of fulfillment of the prophecy by taking the good news to the poor, releasing the captives, recovering sight for the blind and letting the oppressed go free. It was indeed a time of the Lord's favor. All recorded in our canon of scripture.

There is a cacophony of words uttered every day, everywhere around us. Words matter and every so often there comes a set of words that are uplifting and life changing. Jimmy Carter invoked the prophetic words of the prophet Micah (6:8) in his inauguration speech. "And what does the Lord require of you. To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." JFK uttered the memorable line "ask not what America will do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

President Biden drew in part on words of St Augustine who he said wrote "that a people was a multitude defined by the common objectives of their love." He then defined the common objectives as "opportunity, security, liberty, dignity, respect, honor and truth." He pleaded with the nation to "end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal." He went on, "We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts. If we show a little tolerance and humility," and empathy. These sentiments ring true for all Christians of good conscience as we try to emulate what Jesus taught us about loving our neighbor.

The words that Jesus uttered mattered a great deal then and matter as much, if not more now. As followers of Jesus Christ these words are inextricably bound to us in the spirit that was instilled in us at our baptism.

Jesus' ministry was one of persistent love, justice and mercy. He taught in many places, healed the sick, released the captives, gave sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free and proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor. This was the messianic mission, the epiphany of God's glory in action. The originality of Jesus was not that he lived out these ideals, as many prophets before had done, but that he proclaimed that the ancient prophecy of God's return to earth had been fulfilled in his life.

When Jesus commenced his ministry he did not seek to undertake it on his own. He understood that he had to gather a few trusted people around him to steep them in his calling and the good news. He needed emissaries, people he could trust to take the good news of his promise of salvation out into the world, to plant seeds, nurture the flock and bring people into reconciliation with God.

The first disciples he called was Andrew and Simon Peter, followed by James and John. You will note from the account that all four of these men left what they were doing and immediately followed Jesus. They had been preordained for this ministry. When Jesus called, they listened and reacted immediately. They put down their nets, the tools of their trade, and in the case of James and John, left their father Zebedee alone in the boat, probably with a dropped jaw and look of astonishment on his face. Do you have the same faith that these men demonstrated to turn from ones' life immediately, to a new life with Jesus Christ at the center?

For Jesus has called us to be his disciples. We now have the responsibility to carry on Jesus' ministry and messianic mission. We each have our own God-given gifts and talents and we come together as the body of Christ to give thanks to God and to live out this mission.

We may think that Jesus became human like us through his birth, but we now discover that we are invited to become human like him and take up his cross and live out this ministry we are called to.

We are all bound together with Jesus, nourished by his life and incorporated into his mystical body. Our lives are conformed to his by the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. In him we find peace, love, mercy and justice, balm for our souls and light for the world.

May it be so for this nation as it embarks on its own journey of reconciliation and healing, and may we also do Jesus proud and help to make this country a more perfect union, as the founding fathers intended.

Amen.