

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
January 25, 2009  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: **Called Out By God,**  
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10, Psalm 62: 5-12, Mark 1: 14-20

As I worked on this sermon this week, I was reminded that this period of time is a special season in the life of the church. No, it is not called Super Bowl Season, but having grown up in Pittsburgh I know that is what is called there. I am sure the question of whether or not the Steelers will be the Super Bowl Champions has been the consuming question in my home city. For the Christian church however, the post-season of Christmas is called the season of Epiphany, wherein a revelation of the "Champion," "God's Champion" is celebrated by Christians. Epiphany, in the context of the Christian faith, means "the revelation of the divine nature of Jesus," who is not only the "Champion" of all "Champions," but the "Lord of all Lords."

After all the Advent, Christmas and New Year's celebrations, most Christians may not get too excited about Epiphany, because all the celebrations of revelation of God's "Champion," Jesus, seem to have taken place in December. This is not so. In Epiphany, Jesus, as God's "Champion" begins to reveal his mission to the world and call people to join him in it. Yes, his birth was very dramatic and important, but now we begin to see his and God's whole game plan unfold so that it includes you and me 2000 years later.

As with any football game or campaign there is a kickoff event. Even Jesus planned one. As we heard in the reading of Mark, Jesus kicked off the Kingdom of God in his call to Simon Peter and his brother, Andrew, and James and John to be fishers of people. I suspect that Jesus put a lot of contemplation into who he was going to call, yet, his call was one of urgency. He did not spend anytime under a fig tree calmly teaching like most teachers did then. He was out among the people actively recruiting for his team who would serve him in his and God's mission to the world. Jesus planned a very active kickoff event.

Most kickoff events also have a slogan, so as Mark tells us, "After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe the good news!" This was his slogan and by it Jesus was saying, "Listen to me, people, I am my word and you must with respond to me with all urgency for the Kingdom of God is not a spectator event, it actively includes all who respond positively to my message." It also means that all those to whom the message from Jesus comes to are on the field of play, and must immediately decide whether or not to take part in God's game. In a football game, especially in one like the Super Bowl, can you imagine any of the players on the field being indecisive about whether they wanted to play the game? When Jesus approached the four fishermen, and invited them to follow him, they did not seem to spend much time contemplating the call. Instead, they suddenly and immediately dropped their nets to get into the game called the Kingdom of God. They heard, "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of

God has come near, repent, and believe the good news!" And they did just what Jesus called them to do.

I do not know about you, but when someone requires of me an immediate decision of such import, and I am not clear about it, I get confused, flustered and even rebellious. "You want me to do what? When?" I'd like to say, "Let's slow down a bit and clarify the steps Jesus asks us to take, to repent and believe the good news!" But, Jesus did not offer that option, he wants us to contemplate on the run and say "Yes" to him, NOW!

It was no different in the Old Testament Lesson in Jonah. The City of Nineveh was told to repent immediately by God through Jonah. The word for repent in both Jonah and Mark means "to have another mind" or "to change our minds." Nineveh of Jonah's time was a superpower city in need of a change of mind. It was filled with wickedness and violence. Ironically, Nineveh was located in modern day Iraq. The Bible is not more specific than this. We see this same wickedness in our own cities and towns where hatred, poverty, racial prejudice, environmental poisoning, prostitution, gambling, gangs, drugs, domestic violence and dishonest business and politics are a way of life. This is not God's way and it will destroy us unless we repent, that is change our minds and live God's way. This is not easily done, but God required an urgent response from Nineveh. The leader and the people responded to God as the disciples did to Jesus, immediately. Nineveh did not take much time to contemplate the call, did they? They dropped their old ways and changed so quickly that even Jonah was blown away by the response. So even though some of us want to take our good old time and contemplate the call, we must realize that when Jesus calls us to repent, and follow him, he does so with urgency. Our contemplation must be short and the decision must come very quickly.

Jesus tells us the same thing many times over in the gospels. He constantly urges us to quickly contemplate his call and say, "Yes," NOW. This is what he expected of Simon, Andrew, James and John. An immediate and positive response to following Jesus means we put him first in our lives which those men did. Jesus is to be number one in our lives, and nothing else is to get in the way, not even sports.

Oh other things get in the way of our making Jesus number one or we let them become number one. "A wealthy Texan illustrated this all too well as he was being buried in style. According to his will, he was propped behind the wheel of his solid gold Cadillac. The car was poised before a large grave excavated in the prairie. On signal the brakes were released and the lavish automobile, with its erstwhile owner rolled into the grave. As it drifted to a stop and the dust settled, one spectator said in awe, 'Man, that is livin!'" Ya, right! What we must do for the sake of the gospel and our relationship to Christ is let go of our "solid gold Cadillacs," and follow Christ's way of life. "Emphasis," Jan-

Feb, 1997 pg. 29.

Susan Rauch wrote a poem that expresses the struggle of surrendering to God. It is entitled: "A New Way of Struggling" . (A Guide to Prayer For Ministers and Other Servants pg. 331)

"To struggle used to be,  
To grab with both hands,  
and shake,  
and twist,  
and turn,

and push,  
and shove and not give in.  
But wrest an answer from it all  
As Jacob did a Blessing.  
But there is another way  
To struggle with an issue, a question-  
Simply to jump-

Off

into the abyss,  
and find ourselves  
floating  
falling  
tumbling  
being led  
slowly and gently  
but surely  
to the answers God has for us-  
to watch the answers unfold  
before our eyes and still  
to be part of the unfolding.

But, oh! the trust  
Necessary for this new way!  
Not to be always reaching out  
For the old hand-holds."

Putting Jesus first by repenting and believing the Good News does not mean we abandon our marriages, our children, our health concerns and our relationships, but it means we are to put them in second place behind the Kingdom of God. Actually, when we put the Kingdom of God first, our marriages, children, health and relationships improve because we have repented or changed our minds from serving something other than God to making God in Jesus Christ number one in our hearts, minds, souls and bodies.

Repenting and believing the good news in Jesus gives us as cities, families, and individuals a new start in life, to live God's way. God's way is one of love, financial sharing, racial harmony, clean water, air and soil, healthy sexuality and families, wise use of money, respect for neighbors, treating our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit, and honest business and political practices. We know that we need to start this new life, NOW. This is a result of repenting and believing the good news of Jesus Christ. A call we must respond to with urgency.

The good news of being part of God's Kingdom is also well stated in the Psalm. The Psalmist tells us that apart from God's strength, we cannot be sure about ourselves except for our weaknesses. But when we are in God's Kingdom and believe in the good news, we have a new beginning where God is our hope, mighty rock, salvation, fortress, deliverance, honor, refuge and steadfast love. For those of us who have lost loved ones, who may be ill, who may be going through job and relationship

changes, or who may still be seeking the Kingdom of God, this is good news.

The good news and the Kingdom of God are even more than all this. Simon and Andrew, James and John, the City of Nineveh, and the Psalmist responded suddenly and immediately to the personhood of God. This personhood, this epiphany of God, we find revealed to us today in Jesus Christ. He comes to us today with an urgent request for our positive response of faith in him. Very soon, our confirmation class will have the opportunity to respond by confessing their faith in God in Jesus Christ. We will also have an opportunity to publicly confess or reaffirm our faith in him in the Apostles' Creed that follows the reception of Madeleine Sato, Kendyll Farrell, Kayla Cook and Matt Carver in to the membership of the church. As we give ourselves to Christ, he will indeed lead us, into the field of play, the world out there that desperately needs to meet, and respond in the affirmative to the One who truly is the, "Champion of all Champions," "Lord of all Lords."

Jesus invites everyone to come join him on his team where we can all participate in the true super bowl, the Kingdom of God. As we hear Christ's call to be on his team, let us with a sense of urgency prepare ourselves in this Epiphany season to respond suddenly and immediately to serving this Lord, with changed hearts and renewed enthusiasm to win others to him so that they will make him their number one, their Champion, their Lord and Savior, too.