

Epiphany 3 / January 25, 2026

Matthew 4:17

*"From that time Jesus began to preach saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'."*

### Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand

Jesus began His public ministry proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of heaven saying, *"Repent."* Jesus began His public ministry in Galilee, the north of Israel, in what centuries earlier had been the northern kingdom called 'Israel.' The northern kingdom called 'Israel' was the seat of idolatry and rebellion against the God appointed kingship of David. With that in mind, it's odd that the Son of God, the God appointed Christ and heir to the throne of David, would begin His ministry in Galilee. It's odd that He was raised there. Nazareth was in Galilee and Nazareth was His home. It seems odd, but it expresses the faithfulness of God's love, which reaches out to the most rebellious and godless with the promise of forgiveness and the call to come out of the darkness of the shadow death and live in the light of the love of God. 'O Israel, your sins have separated you from God. But come now and return to the Lord. He is faithful and forgiving, not counting our sins and sinfulness against us.'

In Galilee the faithless king, Jeroboam established his own temple at Bethel and ordained his own priests to offer sacrifice to golden calves saying, *"Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."* In Galilee the treacherous queen, Jezebel, hunted down and massacred those faithful to Lord and put their prophets to death, as she attempted to replace the worship of the Lord with devotion to her fertility god, Baal. In Galilee her husband, King Ahab, commanded the King of Judah, the descendent of David, to go into battle with him wearing his royal robes to make him the target for the opposing army's archers and swordsmen. Into Galilee the Lord continually sent His prophets to call the faithless to faith, the idolators to worship the one true God and the sinful to repent. God does that because He is full of love and compassion, desiring not the death of sinners, but that we would turn to Him in repentance and live. God calls us to Himself in Christ Jesus. He calls us to repent. Repent is to see, receive and believe in Jesus as Saviour and follow Him as Lord.

Jesus calls out to sinners, first in Galilee, then in Judea, now throughout the world, that we would see the sins that separate us from the Creator, bringing pain

and death to our lives. Jesus calls out to us that we would see, receive and believe in Him as our Saviour and live. Galilee was referred to by the prophet Isaiah as *"Galilee of the Gentiles and the region and shadow of death."* The death was twofold: spiritual and physical. Galilee was a place to die, as it was often the site of horrific battles between the empires of the north and the empires of the south. Galilee was a place of death for thousands of Israelites in the eighth century before Christ. The Assyrians repeatedly invaded and finally sent much of the population away and dispersed them throughout their empire. It was Galilee of the Gentiles, because in place of the dispersed Israelites, the Assyrians transplanted other conquered people from among the nations. It was a place of spiritual death, because those Gentiles brought with them their idols and religious practices that were offensive to the worship of the Lord. In that place of death and spiritual darkness, light dawned with the coming of Jesus, the beginning of His ministry and His call to repentance.

Galilee was a place of death during Jesus' lifetime. Around the time of Jesus' birth an uprising against Herod and Roman rule was brutally repressed. Galilee during Jesus' ministry was a mixed population of Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles. The Jews of Judea in the south looked down upon the Galileans as corrupted by their close association with Gentiles. They saw them as second rate Jews, because of their past history as idol worshippers and rebels against the kingship of David. Galilee is the perfect representation of the world, separated from God by sin. Rebellious against His will and His ways, dead to Him in spirit. Galilee was the perfect place for Jesus to begin His ministry. Jesus comes as light shining in the land of darkness, dispelling the shadow of death and the darkness of ignorance of God, His will, His ways and His love, by the proclamation of His word. Jesus comes to enlighten the darkness of our sin affected understanding of God, by making Him known as holy, yet loving, as just, yet forgiving. We live in a world in bondage to sin, subject to the will of the devil, under the shadow and condemnation of death. Jesus sets us free through His sacrifice for our sins and His resurrection for our salvation. Jesus calls us to receive Him as our God and Saviour. All who receive Him, who believe in His Name, He gives the second birth as the children of God. Jesus comes to us in His word. He speaks to us now. In faith we receive Him now.

The most important part of our gospel is Jesus' call. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew to follow Him. Immediately they leave their nets and follow Him. Jesus calls James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Immediately they leave their boat and their father and follow Him. Jesus' call has power. When Jesus called evil spirits to

remove themselves from their hosts, they departed immediately. When Jesus called the dead to arise, they got up immediately. When Jesus called the wind to cease its billows and the sea to stop its roiling, they ceased and desisted immediately. In the next chapter Matthew records Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus finishes speaking the reaction of the congregation is astonishment. Matthew says they were astonished because He spoke and taught, as one who has authority. Jesus has authority as the eternally begotten Son of God. Jesus' words have authority, because He is the eternal Word of God who became flesh and made His dwelling among us. He speaks the word of God as the Word and Son of God. Jesus called. Simon and Andrew, James and John, dropped everything and followed Him immediately.

Jesus called, but not everyone responded like Simon and Andrew, James and John. In fact, even among those who followed His call, many later turned away in disbelief, finding His words too hard to believe. Jesus' words show Him the Son of God, but the words Jesus speaks can be resisted. People can decide not to follow Jesus. People can decide to stop following Jesus. Jesus' call to repentance is not a command which we are compelled to obey. Jesus' call is a gracious invitation to come to Him for forgiveness, peace with God and life in time and for eternity. Jesus' invitation cannot be accepted by our will and power, but only by the power of Jesus' invitation. When Jesus calls, He gives the Holy Spirit and the power to accept the call and receive Him in our hearts. He calls us to Himself now through the gospel. He calls us to abide with Him in the promise of our baptism. He calls us to receive Him in the eating of His body and blood under the forms of bread and wine in Holy Communion. He gives us the Holy Spirit so we can answer the call in faith and walk with Him in faithfulness. When Jesus calls, we must take His word seriously. There is no word or call of greater importance. The writer of Hebrews urges us not to put off responding to His call, saying, "today is the day of salvation." When He calls, we must answer Him immediately and completely. The immediate and complete response of Peter and Andrew, James and John shows there is nothing more important than His call and following Him in faith and faithfulness. He has the words of eternal life. He is the eternal Word of Life. His words give us life in time and for eternity!

We might wonder how Peter and Andrew, James and John could drop everything immediately and follow Jesus when He called. But when you consider Jesus and His call, how could they have done anything else! Jesus calls us out of the land and shadow of death to walk in His light. Jesus calls that He would take the burden of

sin and guilt from our shoulders in the forgiveness of His cross. Jesus calls that we would be translated from the domain of the devil into the kingdom of God. Jesus calls that the righteous reign of God would take hold of our hearts and He would reign in our lives. The disciples who followed Jesus had their moments of decision after they followed His call. Many upon reflection decided against the Spirit's call and chose to follow Jesus no more. Jesus asked those who remained if they too wanted to go away. Peter replied in words given and empowered by the Holy Spirit, *"Lord to whom shall we go. You have the words of the eternal life."*

Many things are important in life. Nothing is more important than the gospel call, Jesus' call. He calls us daily in His word. He calls us whenever we remember our sins and the promise of our baptism. He calls us as often as we approach His table to receive the promise of His body and blood. He calls us to faith and faithfulness. He calls us to repent, believe the gospel, walk His light and receive the gifts He gives us; forgiveness in time and life in eternity. Repent, believe the gospel. Repent, receive Jesus your Saviour. Repent, walk in His light. Repent, receive the gifts He gives you by His Spirit. Repent, receive and believe the power and promise of His word. God bless us with the Holy Spirit that when Jesus calls, we may answer in faith and faithfulness until faith is made full in eternal life. In Jesus' Name. Amen