

The Holy Gospel according to Mark the 1st chapter.  
**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>14</sup>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.”

<sup>16</sup>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>18</sup>And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

<sup>20</sup>Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

The gospel of the Lord.  
**Praise to you, O Christ.**

### **To the Glory of God!**

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and From Jesus, the Christ

There is a wonderful scene in the movie *When Harry Met Sally* – no, not the one in where they are having lunch in the café. This one comes at the end of the movie. Harry and Sally’s relationship has gone through many changes. They have had a fight. It’s New Year’s Eve. Sally is at a party, wondering where her life will go, and Harry comes into that party looking for her. She tells him, she can’t do this. She knows it’s New Year’s Eve, she knows he’s lonely, but she just can’t deal with him now. Harry responds “I have been doing a lot of thinking...It’s **not** because I’m lonely and it’s **not** because it’s New Year’s Eve. I came here tonight because when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.”

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fish for people.” <sup>18</sup>And **immediately** they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup>**Immediately** he called them; and **they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.**

When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life following somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible. Maybe even **immediately**.

Like the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, Christian faith is about relationship. Yes, there are creeds, doctrine and beliefs and, yes, they are important, but they are not really what Christian faith is about. Creeds, doctrines and beliefs don't give new life; a relationship with the living God in human flesh gives new life. When Jesus called Peter and Andres, James and John, and the other disciples, he never mentioned creeds, doctrines or beliefs, he simply said “Follow me.” It was an invitation into a relationship with him.

Today's first reading comes from the book of Jonah. If you ask Christians what the book of Jonah is about, most of them will respond, “Oh, that's the book about a guy who got swallowed by a whale.” The thing is, they are wrong. Jonah is **not** about a guy who gets swallowed by a whale. Yes, he does get swallowed by a whale, but if you think that's what the book of Jonah is about, you have missed the real point of the book. It's like saying Michael Jordan is a guy who did underwear commercials on television. Yes, he did some commercials, but try telling a basketball fan that's **who** Michael Jordan is. He will tell you that you have missed the whole point.

I said that to prepare you for what I'm going to say next. Christian faith is not about going to heaven when you die. Don't get me wrong. Yes, heaven is in there, just like the whale is in the book of Jonah. But as wonderful as heaven is going to be, **truly wonderful beyond anything we can imagine**, heaven is **not** what Christian faith is all about. **Jesus** is what it is all about. What makes heaven so wonderful is not the place, or anything about it, it is that there we will see Jesus face to face, there we will know him fully and completely, even as we are fully known. In heaven we will experience fully what it means that we are children on God, sisters and brothers of Jesus. If I haven't convinced you that it's about relationship and **not** “about going to heaven when you die,” listen to Jesus praying shortly before his arrest: “*And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*” (John 17:3) Eternal life doesn't begin when we die, eternal life begins when our life is joined to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Part of the reason it is important to be clear about all this is that the most widely used approach to evangelism in this country starts by focusing on the question of where you will go when you die. Sometimes this approach includes diagrams which show the cross as the bridge that allows us to get to heaven. With this approach, **going to heaven when we die is the issue and Jesus is introduced as a means to that end.** I am convinced that whenever we make Jesus the means to our desired ends, **we are missing the point.** That is true whether our desired end is getting to heaven, keeping our kids off drugs, becoming prosperous, or anything else. Yes, Jesus, by his love and grace, might well bring those things about. **But if we take seriously the life that Jesus lived and the death that Jesus died, then I don't see how we can treat Jesus as a means to getting whatever ends or results we desire.**

Now then, I feel like I need to say a couple of things. One is that, thankfully, God doesn't wait until we come up with perfect or even good approaches before God will use them. Many people have come to know Christ through the sort of evangelistic approach I just criticized. That doesn't mean their faith is deficient or second rate. I don't believe there are any second rate Christians. We are saved by grace and live by grace. Hopefully, those who do begin their faith through this approach come to realize that it is all about Jesus, and not heaven.

Secondly, we need to honestly acknowledge that **few of us, as Lutherans,** have made sharing the good news about Jesus an important part of our faith and life. One statistic I have heard is that the typical Lutheran invites a non-family member to come to a worship service once every 19.7 years. That's terrible. We have got to do much better than that. And we can. If Christian faith is about relationship, so is evangelism. The most effective approach to evangelism is not going out and knocking on the doors of strangers. The most effective approach to evangelism is finding ways to share, **with the people in our lives, what Jesus means for our lives.** I know that still sounds scary and awkward for most of us. But shouldn't we want to share what is truly important in our lives with the people who are important in our lives? Perhaps the best way of getting comfortable talking about what Jesus means in our lives is to talk about it with one another, with fellow disciples who already share our faith.

One last point. There's another problem with thinking of Christian faith as being about going to heaven when you die. If going to heaven is the bottom line, then the focus becomes whatever is presented as the way to get your "ticket to heaven", be it baptism, asking Jesus into your heart or whatever. Once you have gotten your

ticket, then everything else is secondary, optional. There are those who see it as you get your ticket, put it away in a safe place until you need it and until then, live your life however you please. Admittedly, that's a caricature, but like a caricature, it emphasizes something that is quite real.

Of course, that sort of approach ignores everything the Bible teaches about discipleship and Christian life. Also, if you recognize that Christian faith is about relationship, it just plain doesn't make any sense. If you want to spend all eternity with Jesus, why, in the world, wouldn't you want to spend time with Jesus now?

After, all, when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life - eternal life - with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.

Amen