

SERMON FOR SUNDAY JANUARY 25 2026

Think Again, Epiphany 3 (A) – 2026 – Matthew 4:12-26

In the Gospel of Matthew today, Jesus announces the beginning of his ministry with the words, “Repent! For the Kingdom of heaven has come near.” Or as we might translate it: “Think again! God’s Kingdom is almost here.”

This declaration is the starting point for all of Jesus’ teaching. Everything that comes after grows out of his idea that God’s Kingdom is coming to displace the Kingdoms of the world that have perpetuated injustice and impoverished God’s people.

Jesus comes out of the wilderness proclaiming this message, but we aren’t really told to whom. The assumption that most people make is that repentance is primarily a personal matter: I had better repent of my own personal wrong doings. And of course, we had better—we are all better off when we do repent. But in this passage, “repentance” is not the message Jesus brings to individuals. Individuals like Peter and Andrew and James and John (and perhaps, you and me) get a different message: “Follow me.”

So then, who is the recipient of the “repent” message? Think again—the kingdom of heaven has come near! There is a challenge in this pronouncement. Who is Jesus really telling to step aside? It isn’t the common people, like Peter and John, the people down on the ground. The coming of God’s Kingdom is good news for the poor.

The person who’s got to be worried if a new king shows up is the old king. In this case it was Caesar, the Emperor of Rome, and all of Caesar’s client kings and subordinate rulers and hangers-on who benefited from his reign. Now why would Caesar need to think again?

This is a good question, and its answer is tied to another question you may be asking: why exactly were Peter and Andrew and John and the others so eager to quit fishing for fish and start fishing for people? It seems remarkable how quickly they respond to Jesus’ invitation. “Follow me,” Jesus says, and Matthew tells us, “immediately they left their nets and followed him.” They give up their livelihoods without a second thought to follow an itinerant preacher around the Galilean countryside.

This response is remarkable, but maybe not as remarkable as it seems. For us, of course, if we think of fishing at all, we are much more likely to think of a sunny mountain stream or a lazy afternoon on a boat. But Peter and Andrew and John weren’t fishing for sport—they were fishing to survive. They were merely cogs in the economy of the Roman Empire. In fact, fishermen were so heavily taxed for the right to fish the sea of Galilee that their backbreaking labor netted them just enough to survive, but little else.

You can begin to see why Jesus was put to death by the Roman authorities as a political revolutionary: the first act of his ministry was to tell the Emperor to “think again,” and in the next moment, to liberate some of the cogs in the Emperor’s great machine.

The Roman Empire seems long ago and far away—something fantastical and unreal that we know only from television and movies. The real Roman Empire wasn’t a good place to be a peasant. By Jesus’ time it was a totalitarian domination system. Which we like to think has nothing to do with us, safe in our modern western democracy.

Nevertheless, the picture God is trying to reveal to us through these stories from long ago—part of the thing that will help us “think again” and maybe alter our course—is that concentrated wealth and power still tend to be bad news for those at the bottom of the economic system.

There are still powers and rulers in our world today, in government or in business, who abuse their position to benefit themselves and their friends, to the detriment of the vast majority of God’s people. How are we to resist these powers? Especially when most of us benefit in some way because the system is set up the way it is. Can we build a world where resources are shared and not hoarded? Where God’s love and God’s justice rule? Where Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of heaven becomes a reality?

Just like the first disciples God calls us to follow Christ. In our first lesson from Genesis we hear God placed humankind in a garden—not just to eat from it, but to tend it with care. To till it, yes—but also to keep it. The land was given as a gift, and with it, a calling: to be stewards of the earth and of one another. One of the gardens of God’s creation is the Lake Chad region, in Central and West Africa. Once full of fish, farmland, and fruit-bearing trees, this area has long sustained families who rely on farming, fishing, and livestock to survive. But today, the land is struggling.

Since the 1960s, Lake Chad has shrunk by 90%. The climate is changing. Rainfall is harder to predict. Growing seasons are shorter. Soils are degraded. Overgrazing and deforestation are turning fertile ground into desert. Crops are failing. Food is disappearing.

And when food disappears, so much else begins to fall apart. Children leave school. Families lose their income. Malnutrition spreads. People are pushed into desperation. This is more than a food crisis—it’s a crisis of survival.

But the story does not end here.

As followers of Christ, we are called to love our neighbours and care for creation. That includes rethinking how we live, how we eat, and how we share. Even the smallest actions—what we grow, what we consume, what we waste—can ripple outward and make a difference.

Canadian Lutheran World Relief is working with farmers and families in the Lake Chad Basin to rebuild food systems in ways that are sustainable, just, and full of dignity. That includes training farmers in techniques that protect the soil, retain water, and improve harvests—even as the climate changes.

Better livestock and fishery practices are also being introduced, so that communities can continue producing food in ways that respect both the earth and the generations to come.

God is always re-creating. The land is resilient. And we are invited to take part in the healing.

When we care for creation, we care for each other. When we keep the garden, we reflect the love of the One who planted it. As people of faith, we are called to till and keep the earth—not only so that we may be fed, but so that all may be fed.

Jesus is calling us to join in this work. His invitation today is: Follow me. It is up to us to build God's Kingdom, and Jesus tells us that we can. When we repent. When we think again. Every time we open our hands and hearts to share God's abundance with those in need brings God's Kingdom closer. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask for it—your Kingdom come on earth, as in heaven.

Amen.