

## “Repentance and Renewal”

Mark 1.1-15; 7.14-15, 20-13

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Here we are, at the dawn of another new year. Seems like these years get shorter and shorter as time goes on. New year, new beginning, new opportunity to renew our faith and recommit to our Lord, especially after all the busy-ness around Christmas that always seems to distract us from the *real* reason why we celebrate the holiday. God came *here!* For *us!* May we never forget that.

We’re taking a brief foray today into Mark’s gospel, the familiar story of Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. The liturgical calendar has us remember the Baptism of the Lord on the Sunday immediately following Epiphany, right on the heels of Christmas. We move from Jesus’ promised coming, birth, and early childhood right into the first recorded moment in his adult life. There’s a lot that we could talk about here – what it means to call Jesus “the Christ” and “the Son of God,” the fulfillment of prophecy, the massive crowds flocking to John, what might have been wrong with the established religious system that made John’s message so appealing, where the ritual of baptism came from, why Jesus felt he needed to be baptized, the relationship between baptism by water and baptism by the Holy Spirit, what the vision of heaven being torn apart signifies, whether anyone other than Jesus heard God’s voice thundering from heaven, why the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, how and why Satan tempted Jesus, what it means that the angels “waited on” or “ministered to” Jesus – this is a *rich* passage, with layer upon layer that sets the stage for Jesus’ ministry, and indeed the whole gospel story.

But I want to focus attention this morning on just one aspect of this story, namely, the *message* that both John and Jesus were proclaiming. Mark tells us that John was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Then when Jesus emerges from the wilderness of temptation, he makes his way to Galilee where he proclaimed this message: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’ There is a common theme here; both John and Jesus proclaim a message where *repentance* plays a crucial role. *Repent* – Merriam-Webster defines that as “to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one’s life.” In the original Greek, the word has to do with *changing one’s mind*, specifically *changing one’s mind for the better*, with an emphasis on feeling remorse or regret for one’s past actions that were wrong or sinful, coupled with a desire to gain God’s pardon. It makes me wonder: what kind of sins were people repenting from? All these people were coming out to John at the River Jordan, seeking to restore a right relationship with God. They wouldn’t have been coming if they didn’t have a *reason*. What was going on in their lives that motivated them to make that journey? Mark and the other evangelists are silent on that point.

The emphasis is not on *all the things that they had been doing wrong* but rather on *what they were choosing to do right*: come to the water, confess their sin, be washed, cleansed, renewed; symbolically and metaphorically, to die to their old life and rise to their new, with a fresh, renewed commitment to God. The emphasis is not on judgment for sins of the past, but on *hope* for a more upright future.

The same type of thing is going on when Jesus proclaims his message in Galilee: “*Repent, and believe in the gospel.*” He wants people to hear and receive the good news, but that is paired with a change of heart, a change of attitude, a change of mind that is part and parcel of Jesus’ message. Inviting Jesus into our lives involves examining our choices and our deeds, realizing that some of them may be wrong or sinful, and – as Merriam-Webster puts it – “dedicating oneself to the amendment of one’s life.” Following Jesus means that we need to make *different* choices than we have in the past.

Which, of course, is an ever-growing process for us. We don’t just get rid of all our sin in a moment, in an instant. We have to continually examine our lives, see where we’re out of step, where we’ve strayed off the path, and make some course corrections. Our annual Baptism of the Lord remembrance, which this year falls on the first Sunday of the new year, is a good time to do that. Where are *you* out of step? In what ways have you strayed off the path? What kind of course correction do you need to make, *here, now, today*? What does *repentance* look like for *you*?

Now it would help if we knew what we might need to repent *from*. We probably have a pretty good idea of what constitutes “right” and “wrong,” but there are plenty of occasions where our definition of “right” and “wrong” might not be the same as somebody else’s definition. “Common sense” isn’t as “common” as we might like! What one person might think is “wrong” another person might think is perfectly okay – while meanwhile, someone might be feeling bad about something they did, when in reality there was nothing inherently *wrong* with the deed. We humans are simply not capable of having a solid grasp of “right” and “wrong” without *wisdom* ... wisdom that comes from *God*. We need guidance. We need *definitive* guidance. Who, ultimately, can tell us *definitively* what’s wrong and what’s right? Not you. Not me. Not your mom or dad; not your teacher or mentor or elder.

There’s a reason why we Christians call Jesus *Lord*. There’s a reason why *he* is the one we are called to trust and obey, in life and in death. *He* is the ultimate authority. No one else. *No other god*.

So I’m grateful that, later on in the gospel, in chapter 7, we start to get some specificity on things that are wrong. The context is a debate with the Pharisees and the scribes about certain man-made traditions that they valued highly, specifically including the washing of hands before a meal. Now we all know that it’s a good idea to wash your hands before you eat, but the point that Jesus is making is that the sins that *really* matter don’t have to do with man-made traditions. There’s nothing *evil* about failing to wash your hands before a meal. What’s *evil* are things like murder, and theft, and adultery, and slander – the truly *bad* things that we humans do. Jesus lifts up twelve specific sins in this list. It is not a comprehensive list of all the sins and vices that we can fall prey to, but at least it’s a start.

The trouble is, the meaning of some of these words is not immediately obvious. If you compare several different English translations, you’ll find that some of these words are translated in a variety of different ways. It’s “arrogance” in some translations, and “pride” in others. It’s “unrestrained

immorality” in one translation, and “lewdness” or “licentiousness” or “promiscuity” in others. There is not always a direct one-to-one correspondence between the Greek original and the English translation, and translators make different decisions, some of which are better than others. The temptation, for us readers, is to pick and choose the translation we like the best – which is a subjective measure, to be sure. What we *ought* to do, to the extent we are able, is try to figure out what these words actually meant. My Monday night class spent some time doing that a few weeks ago, and it was a very illuminating exercise. A few particular highlights: (1) It’s not *pride* – it’s *excessive* pride, *hyper*-pride, a kind of selfish, haughty, arrogant pride. (2) It’s not just *insults* – it’s any kind of speech which denigrates, defames, disrespects, or slanders anyone else. And (3) the first word in the list is typically translated *fornication*, which technically refers to two unmarried people sleeping together, but the Greek term is broader than that and encompasses a broad range of sexual sins, including fornication, prostitution, incest, and more – basically, any sexual activity that involves a person other than one’s spouse. Jesus says that *all* of these behaviors are wrong, *all* represent a form of evil that we need to repent from.

This is just one list; there are other similar lists elsewhere in the New Testament. If we’re going to claim that we’re Christian, if we’re going to say that we follow Jesus, then we need to *mean* what we say, we need to strive to put all these things behind us. Not just screw up during the week and then come here expecting confession and forgiveness each Sunday morning – as Paul said, “shall we continue to sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!” – but do the deeper work, the harder work, of truly *repenting* from the things we do that displease God. That requires work, it requires diligence, it requires fortitude, it requires prayer – not just “pretty please” prayers, but “Dear Lord, *help me!*” prayers. It requires a willingness to *grow*, a willingness to *change*. Christianity is not for wimps!

So we come to the water. The water of rebirth, renewal, regeneration. Most of us have been baptized; we have been washed, cleansed, restored, forgiven, *loved*, accepted as Christ’s own. What we do here today is simply a reminder of what happened then: a mutual commitment, us (or our parents) declaring our intent to live a Christian life, and God declaring that we are forgiven and freed, able to live in the joy and the peace of the gospel. If you’re sincere about following Jesus in 2018, if you are earnestly striving to put all forms of sin behind you, if you are really trying to let *God* direct your life rather than live it however you personally see fit, then I invite you: *come to the water*.

How we’re going to do this today is a little different than what we’ve done in the past. The choir is going to sing, and while they are singing, I’d like to invite you to come forward, at your own pace. Cup your hands. I will sprinkle a little water in your hands. You can rub the water into your hands, you can dab it on your forehead in the form of a cross, you can dribble it on your head – whatever works for you. There is nothing *magical* about the water; it in and of itself does not have the power to liberate you from your sins and set you free to a bright new future. Only *God* does that. The water *reminds* us of that sacred moment when we claimed God – and God claimed us. Lord knows, we all need reminders, visible, tangible reminders of our commitment, and God’s grace.

So come, my friends. Come to the water. Come to the water of faith ... and grace.

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