

“A Baptism of Repentance”

Mark 1:1-8

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We begin the Gospel story anew today. Mark’s gospel contains no birth narrative – no Mary and Joseph, no visit to Bethlehem, no shepherds, no angels, no star, no wise men. Mark’s story begins with Jesus fully grown, about 30 years old. It begins in the desert wilderness, with a man named John.

Who was John the Baptist? He was a Jew, a member of the tribe of Levi, a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses. He was an un-ordained preacher who had a large crowd of followers in the Judean wilderness, near the Jordan River. He was the fulfillment of prophecy. His father was a priest in the temple of Jerusalem; John could have become a priest himself. But God had other plans for him. John didn’t wear fancy vestments; he wore a cloak made of camel’s hair. John didn’t offer animal sacrifices to help people have a right relationship with God; John offered baptism to help people have a right relationship with God – a symbolic, ritual washing, putting off the old self and putting on the new.

John proclaimed a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People came to him from all around, confessing their sins and being baptized by him in the Jordan. Evidently, organized religion wasn’t working for a lot of people. Maybe it had become too complacent. Maybe it had lost its edge. Maybe it had lost its meaning. People wanted something *more* than what the sacrifices in the temple could offer. They wanted to straighten out their lives. They wanted a deeper experience of *God*.

So they came to John, in droves, to hear his message and confess their sins. John’s message was about *repentance*. The Greek word is *metanoia*. Literally, it means “a change of mind.” One Greek lexicon defines it like this: “the change of mind of those who have begun to abhor their errors and misdeeds, and have determined to enter upon a better course of life, so that it embraces both a recognition of sin and sorrow for it and hearty amendment, the tokens and effects of which are good deeds.” The word conveys a sense of *careful thinking* that lead to a significant change of heart.

Repentance is something we Christians need to do again and again through the course of our lives. Our lives are not linear journeys; we take sidesteps; we sometimes let sin gain too much control over some part of our life. In the early centuries of the church, seven sins were identified as especially problematic: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth – the “seven deadly sins.” Many other sins are also named in the Bible. Theft, murder, blasphemy, adultery, bearing false witness – the lists are long; some Christians say there are about 125 different sins identified in the Bible, but even those lists may not be complete. We humans sometimes have a remarkable way of devising *new* forms of evil.

The faithful Christian *constantly* examines their life, looking for any way in them that has grown crooked. The faithful Christian confesses those sins to almighty God, and repents. They *change their mind*. This is not something we do just once. We do it again and again ... as many times as necessary.

My question is, in your life *today*, what do you need to confess? What do you need to repent? The answers could be varied and many. For one person, it might be a constant putting-down of other people. For another person, it might be laziness. One person might need to repent from a habit of lying. Another person might need to repent from their selfish greed. The sins we commit are *legion*.

Now I could go on like this, talking about sins common to humanity for centuries upon centuries. But this has not been a common year. This has been an *extraordinary* year – and not in a good way. Three issues have consumed *massive* amounts of our time, energy, and attention. *All* of them are areas where some people – I would daresay, *many* people – need to do some serious repentance. Many of the behavior patterns we have seen this year stand in stark contrast to the gospel values of Jesus Christ.

Issue #1: *Racism*. I spent the summer talking about racism. I regret that I haven't talked more about racism over the years. I had a more optimistic – and idealistic – opinion of our society than I should have. Racism is a fundamental violation of the second greatest commandment in Christianity: to *love our neighbor as ourself*. It is a demonic evil that needs to be exorcised from our land. Permanently.

Now, that's a tall order. We're dealing with nearly *five hundred years* of systemic racism here in America. Attitudes and habits and practices and policies and laws took deep root *very early* in American history and have embedded themselves *very deeply* into the fabric of our society. We are living with that legacy. Many of those attitudes, habits, and practices, and some policies and laws, still exist today.

At home we've been reading *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the 1948 novel by Alan Paton, set in South Africa. At one point in the story, a white man comes across some papers that his son, who had been murdered, had written. The father reads: "We believe in the brotherhood of man, but we do not want it in South Africa. We believe that God endows men with diverse gifts, and that human life depends for its fullness on their employment and enjoyment, but we are afraid to explore this belief too deeply. We believe in help for the underdog, but we want him to stay under. And we are therefore compelled, in order to preserve our belief that we are Christian, to ascribe to Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, our own human intentions, and to say that because He created white and black, He gives the Divine Approval to any human action that is designed to keep black men from advancement.... We say we withhold education because the black child has not the intelligence to profit by it; we withhold opportunity to develop gifts because black people have no gifts; we justify our action by saying it took us thousands of years to achieve our own advancement, and it would be foolish to suppose that it will take the black man any lesser time, and that therefore there is no need for hurry.... The truth is that our civilization is not Christian; it is a tragic compound of great ideal and fearful practice, of high assurance and desperate anxiety, of loving charity and fearful clutching of possessions." Those words speak truth. They could have been written about *us*. About the attitudes and beliefs in *our* country. About the ways we try to call ourselves "Christian" while simultaneously failing to follow Jesus.

Do you need to repent? Are there attitudes or beliefs that you carry that are not from Jesus? Do you deny that there are injustices that need to be corrected? Do you somehow think we're *over* it?

Issue #2: The pandemic. Specifically ... *masks*. Health officials have been telling us *since March* that the best way to reduce the spread of the virus is to *wear a mask*. The primary reason for that is because *people can have the disease and be spreading it, and not know it*. The purpose of the mask has always been to *protect other people*, not to protect yourself. Only recently have we learned that wearing a mask has the additional benefit of providing some protection to the mask-wearer. From the

start, in our country, this message has been garbled. There have been all sorts of outcries against wearing masks, all sorts of people stubbornly refusing to wear a mask. I've gone into a local business, right here in Mason, where the employee I had to interact with wasn't wearing a mask. People have shown up at church not wearing masks. A person came to my house, wanting to talk to me, not wearing a mask. Each one of those situations angered me. The reality is, somebody who isn't wearing a mask could inadvertently *kill* another person. We have a term for that; it's called "involuntary manslaughter." Who wants *that* on their conscience? I understand the legal issues pertaining to mask mandates. But I'd also like to hope that the American people truly care about *people* and are willing to *do the right thing* even if it's inconvenient. Almost as many people are dying in our country from this disease *every single day* as died on 9/11. Frankly, I think the refusal to wear masks – *unless there is a legitimate medical reason why a person can't wear one* – is downright selfish. It's a way of saying, "My freedom is more important than *your life*." It fundamentally goes against what Jesus taught us about *love*.

Is there anything here you need to repent? Anything you have said or done? Or ... not done?

Issue #3: The 2020 election. The election that, apparently, still isn't *over*, even though there is a clear winner. Since election day, the Trump campaign and its allies have lost 34 lawsuits that contested election processes, vote counting, and the vote certification process. Judges – both Republican and Democrat – have repeatedly dismissed cases due to their strained legal arguments, speculative accusations, and lack of evidence. Election officials – both Republicans and Democrats – have defended the integrity of the election. The Department of Homeland Security has said that this election was "the most secure in American history" and that "there is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised." Sixteen federal prosecutors who monitored the election reported to Attorney General William Barr that there was no evidence of widespread irregularities. Barr himself has said that "to date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election." And yet the President issued a 46-minute video this week in which he declared the nation's election system "under coordinated assault and siege," claiming – without any evidence – that there was massive fraud "on a scale never seen before," and that he won. He did the same thing yesterday in Georgia, claiming that the election was "rigged." *This is insane*. The American public has been bombarded with a tremendous amount of false claims that have undermined confidence in our democracy. For those of you who are Republicans, this is *hurting your own party*.

This isn't just about politics. This is a deeply *spiritual* matter – one that the New Testament talks about. Paul wrote that "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). John wrote, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Jesus said that "many false prophets will arise and lead many astray" (Matthew 24:11). *Some of you have been led astray*. Peter tells us to "keep alert," because "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The Bible has been telling us about "lying spirits" for more than two thousand years (1 Kings 22:22-23). That is not to say that this man, or any man, is beyond redemption. No one is beyond redemption. We can and should pray for him, and for the all those many people who are being led astray by his many false words.

Christians far and wide need to wake up. To come to our senses. To *repent* and follow Jesus.

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