

Repent?

It's a familiar image to all of us. If you're part of the internet generation, you might even call it a meme. A long-haired, scraggly-bearded fellow in flowing robes and sandals stands on a street corner haranguing passers-by. He holds a sign with huge block letters: "Repent, the End is Near!" In popular culture, this earnest prophet is without honor, not only in his own country but pretty much everywhere. He has become the butt of the joke in countless cartoons and television "black-out" sketches. The giggles start immediately upon his appearance. We know, even we who like to think ourselves kindly disposed to prophets, that he is a representative of mindless doom-saying. He is a modern-day Jeremiah, informed not by the voice of God, in our estimation, but rather than by the not entirely sane voices in his head. We feel free to disregard this poor schlemiel. He is not a representative of what we understand to be thoughtful and effective religion.

But if we start reading the Gospels, we almost immediately run into the primary models for this meme of the out-of-touch seer and to our dismay, they are not characters we feel very comfortable in disregarding. First up, in the third chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, is John the Baptist. Now, if you are like me and grew up in the Baptist Movement, you were likely taught to revere John, if not as the founder of our tradition then at least as the promised forerunner of our Lord and as the guy who got baptism right, unlike all those sprinklers and pourers and baby-washers – my apologies to present company. So, there's John, in his weird clothes and disgusting diet, no doubt looking a whole lot like that fellow in the cartoon, saying "Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Is that really any different from the message we'd gotten used to laughing off from the wild-eyed, wild-haired comic figure?

It gets even worse if we turn to Mark's Gospel. Now it's Jesus to whom we can attribute those absurd words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." What the heck is going on here? Are we supposed to take this stuff seriously? Isn't this just a fancier way of saying, "Repent for the end is near?" Or are we missing something here?

Well, yes, no, and yes. That is, yes, of course we are to take John and Jesus seriously. No, their words shouldn't be simplified into the placard slogan of the cartoon. And, yes, if we don't see the difference between the two messages, then we've missed something and something very important at that. Our passage from Mark for this morning compresses three important stories about Jesus into a scant seven verses – the baptism of Jesus, the temptation of Jesus, and Jesus' initial proclamation of his mission. Rather than try to tackle all three this morning, I want to focus just on verses 14 and 15 and really unpack the incredibly dense language of Mark's headlong, almost frantic, retelling of the Christ story. I hope that by the end of our time, we'll be able to hear these words and think not of a New Yorker cartoon or a Monty Python sketch but rather of the trustworthy promises of our Loving Creator and of God's call to us to follow in the Way of Jesus as faithful, thinking, fully realized human beings who are striving to live up to the Image of God within us.

To begin with, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible which we generally use here at Good Shepherd Baptist gives us some help with understanding what Jesus is on about. In verse 14, Mark tells us that "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God..." This is considerably more helpful than the language used by older English translations, which say that

Repent?

Jesus was “preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God.” Those older translations give us two problems of understanding: the archaic word “gospel” and the enormous concept of the kingdom of God. Let’s look first at the old word.

To the modern mind, “gospel” has come to be a fancy synonym for biography. The place it is most used is in the titles of the first four books of the New Testament: The Gospel According to (or of) Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Those books are biographies of Jesus, so “gospel” must mean “biography,” right? Well, no. Here’s where the NRSV helps us out. “Gospel” is a corruption of an old English word, “Godspell,” but no, it doesn’t mean a clever musical theatre piece, either. “Godspell” is previously derived from Germanic words meaning “good” (“gud”) and “news” (“spiel”). The gospel/godspell/gudspiel is the good news, a meaning that becomes clear if you are fortunate enough to have studied Greek and look at the source Greek for this passage. There the word is εὐαγγέλιον, literally, “the happy announcement.” Jesus wasn’t going around Galilee with sermons of doom and gloom. He was telling people that God had sent good news to them.

Those of you who’ve put up with me for the past seven years may already know where I’m going next. As much as I try to avoid preaching the same thing over and over, there are verses and concepts to which I return as touchstones. Once we start thinking about good news, we see that Mark’s version of Jesus’ early preaching actually connects quite well with one of those passages: Luke’s story about Jesus’ early sermon in his home synagogue of Nazareth. Remember his quotation from Isaiah? “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” The Good News of God is good news to the poor. It’s also, as Jesus further quoted, “release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,” freedom for the oppressed and the time of God’s favor. This is a very different message than the fire and brimstone of the sign-toting street preacher we began with.

Jesus’ message is so different from that dire vision of the end of the world because it is the good news about the kingdom of God. For some of us, steeped in the democratic experiment of the United States, any talk of kings and kingdoms puts our backs up. But we have to remember what sort of king and kingdom we’re talking about here. Jesus told lots of stories about what God’s kingdom is like and I’ve put an illustration of one of the most famous on the cover of our bulletin this morning. We call it the parable of the prodigal son but it’s really less about one wasteful son and more about one father with two sons who loves them both without reservation. Do you remember? The youngest son insults his father and his neighbors by demanding his inheritance before his father’s death, then selling off half of his family’s property and going off to live it up. When he falls on hard times, he plans to come crawling back to take a place as a hired hand on what’s left of the farm. But before he can make his apology, before he even has to face any of his neighbors, his father comes running to meet him, forgives him almost before he apologizes and reinstates him in the family. The loving father even throws a party for his undeserving son, which in turn angers the elder brother. But the father has words of love for him, too. Jesus taught that’s how the kingdom of God works. Love, forgiveness, healing are the marks of God’s reign. To avoid using monarchical words, some modern preachers have begun talking about the banquet of God, because Jesus used that image in several other stories as well. Or, we talk about the Beloved Community, following the example of Martin Luther King. Whatever phraseology

Repent?

we use, what we're talking about, what Jesus came to Galilee to proclaim, is very good news indeed to anyone who hears it.

Let's look now at what Mark tells us Jesus said. Modern scholarship tells us that Mark's version of the story is the oldest, set down perhaps as soon as 30 years after Jesus' death, and tradition holds that Mark's primary source was the apostle Peter, so we may have a very accurate summary of Jesus' preaching here. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Again, let's work through this in chunks.

What did Jesus mean by "the time is fulfilled"? The first thing to know is that Greek had two words for time. The most common was *χρονος*, meaning ordinary time, the kind we measure with clocks. When we say, "time passed slowly," we're talking about *χρονος*. The other kind of time is *καιρος*, a special time, a time of great import, just the right moment. If we say, "it was the best time of my life," we're talking about *καιρος*. For the Jews of Jesus' day, time (*χρονος*) had indeed been passing slowly since the promise of a savior and now, the right moment (*καιρος*) had come. The idea that the time was fulfilled would be very good news to them indeed.

Thinking of the time being fulfilled helps us understand, perhaps, the rush of the Gospel of Mark. Just a few decades after Jesus spoke these words, it must have seemed that there was no time to lose – the good news needed to be spread quickly, the time was *now*! Two thousand years later, we have lost the sense of urgency in responding to the good news. We recognize that the kingdom was inaugurated but not completed at that point in calendar time. But in the eyes of God, the time is still *now*. And for us, I believe, the time is also still *now*. We may "waste time;" we may "kill time;" we may simply ignore time but God is calling us into God's fulfilled time. Because we are tied to the time of clock and calendar, time in which we are not living into God's fulfillment of time is lost to us. When we use our time with purpose, acting or resting, speaking or listening, always loving, we can impact our world, our neighbors, our families. But if we do not respond to the urgency of Jesus' message, we lose chances to do the good news work of helping to create the Beloved Community.

"The kingdom of God," said Jesus, "is at hand." It has "come near." It is within our grasp. It is right here, all we need do is reach out and touch it. It is within us, among us, in our hearts. That's good news, too. We need to recognize the presence of the Beloved Community, reach out to it, but moving into the kingdom does not require superhuman effort. David L. McKenna, writing in "The Communicator's Commentary," reminds us that it's important not only for us to realize this but also that we not give others the sense that the kingdom is beyond their grasp. Too many Christians throughout history have laid rule upon rule, regulation upon regulation on those who would gladly reach out and experience the blessings of the kingdom of God. In this way, we are like the Pharisees, whom Jesus said, insisted that their followers give tithes even of their spice racks, "mint, dill, and cumin," while neglecting "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith." Too often, people who yearn to experience good news are told that they must believe certain things, sing certain songs, read certain books to experience the love of God. Oh, you can't drink that... you can't wear that... you can't love that person... McKenna writes, "If you were to take a poll of the average man on the street, he would probably say that Christians are not conveying the message that "the Kingdom of God is at hand, reach out and

Repent?

take it." Instead, he would probably report the impression that Christians are saying, "The Kingdom of God is distant; and you must jump over many hurdles to get in.""

The Barna Group, a respected Christian research firm, has recently released a study showing that young people born from 1982 to 1993, twenty-somethings, in other words, are leaving the church in sizable numbers for six basic reasons. Some of those relate to this inability of churches to make the kingdom seem accessible. The young people reported that their churches seemed overprotective, saying "Christians demonize everything outside of the church." "Many young adults feel a strong conflict between their religion and science. A full quarter of those surveyed believe "Christianity is anti-science"... Three out of ten believe that their churches are out of step with the modern, scientific world... Many also see their church's views on sexuality as simplistic and judgmental... Many young Americans believe that Christianity is not open-minded or tolerant towards those of other religions." Now, I don't think that we have those problems at Good Shepherd Baptist. But are we making sure that people know that? Are we having conversations with our children or grand-children in this age group to encourage them to see Good Shepherd as something different from the churches that their peers disdain? Are we encouraging them to come and to bring their friends to experience a place where God's love for them is expressed as so much more important than "rules"? Are we letting people know that the Beloved Community is at hand?

If not, maybe we should repent. Ah, there's that troublesome word. When I say "repent," what mental image do you get? Do the words "sackcloth and ashes" come to mind? Beating your breast and wailing, perhaps? Is shame heavily involved? Well, I've got good news for you, pun intended. Mark's Greek word here, μετανοεα, really doesn't mean any of those things. It means to change your mind. It means to make a U-turn. It means leaving behind the bad news that society offers and turning toward the unconditional love offered by God. One commentator suggests we hear this word as "re-focus." John Petty writes, "For Mark, to turn means to turn from the established order of the worldly political powers with their hierarchy and cultural division, and trust Jesus who leads the way into a future of reconciliation and equality." The great Baptist-then-Episcopal preacher John Claypool saw a profound sense of hopefulness in repentance. "Jesus would never have invited people to repent if He had not believed that change was possible. If there wasn't such a thing as hope in any given situation, He would never have tantalizingly said to us that repentance was something that we need to do." Another understanding of μετανοεα is "embracing thoughts beyond (the mind's) present limitations or thought patterns." If we are locked into the notion of a punishing God who demands that we feel bad about ourselves, perhaps it is time to repent. Living in fear is not good news; living in hopefulness is.

Finally and perhaps ultimately, that is Mark's testimony to the message of Jesus: "believe in the good news." Trust that God really does love you and live your life accordingly. Turn away from the destructive way of life that this society encourages and live as a fulfilled human being in God's fulfilled time. Turn away from defiance, guilt and shame and toward truth and love. Accept God's love and forgiveness. These are also the keys to understanding the Church's ancient tradition of Lent. This is not a time of shame but of preparation to be God's living sanctuary, part of God's presence in the world. Lent is a time to seek God's vision as the vision for our lives, allowing God to stretch our hearts and our minds into new patterns of love and

Repent?

service to God's good Creation, to our neighbors no matter how different they might be. Lent is our time to focus anew on learning the ways of Jesus, staying close to him and his path so that we may truly rejoice in the resurrection. Lent, my dear brothers and sisters, is the time to realize that God's love will truly never let us go; that the Light of the World, Jesus, is always available to light our way; that God always seeks us with a word of joy. That's the good news. Thanks be to God.