

“Repent”

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

If you think about it, it’s the very first sermon in Mark’s gospel.

Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, and then the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness, where he spends forty days with Satan and the wild beasts and the ministering angels. And then, some indeterminate amount of time later, he comes to Galilee, “proclaiming the good news of God, and saying [here comes the sermon], ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” I don’t know about you, but when I hear those words, my mind conjures up images of streetcorner evangelists wearing sandwich boards and holding placards with REPENT! written across them in capital letters. I was once handed a tract while standing on a subway platform in Boston that said, on the top, “What do you miss by being a Christian?” And then down below, there was a big, red and white bulls-eye with the word HELL emblazoned across it.

When we hear the word “repent,” we often hear an implicit “or else” attached to it. Repent *or else* you’ll go to hell. Repent *or else* you’ll be cast into the outer darkness. Repent *or else* when the judgment day comes, you’ll find yourself numbered not among the sheep, but among the goats. But if you listen closely, you’ll find that this is not the way that first sermon really goes.

Jesus does not say, “Repent, or else something terrible will happen to you.” He does not even say, “Repent, so that something good will happen to you.” No, what Jesus says is this: “The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The kingdom of God has *already* come near; therefore, repent and believe in the good news. In this first sermon

in Mark's gospel, the in-breaking of God's realm is what inspires and enables our repentance, not the other way around.

Not, "repent, or else bad news." Not, "repent, so that good news." Rather, "good news, so repent." It may seem like semantics, and I suppose that it is, but it makes all the difference in the world—the difference between fearful striving and grateful receiving, the difference between God as strict judge and God as generous lover.

But even if we get our clauses in order and understand repentance as an aftereffect, not a precondition, of God's mercy—we are still left with that sticky, tricky word. Repent.

In English, the word "repent" comes from a Medieval Latin root that means "to regret" or "to be sorry." We might think of it as feeling bad for something we've done. But this is not the root of the word "repent" that is used in today's text.

In Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, the word for "repent" is **μετανοέω**, *metanoeo*, which connotes not regret, not sorry-ness, not feeling bad, but change—a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of ways. It's not about beating yourself up, or punishing yourself, or berating yourself—it's about changing for the better, making a fresh start, doing things differently from now on. It might come out of a realization that you've done something you shouldn't have, or not done something you should have, but it's not primarily about looking back in regret—it's about looking forward in hope and commitment.

In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, the word for "repentance" is **תשובה**, *teshuvah*, which means turning, or turning around, or returning. Again, it's not about self-flagellation or self-condemnation, but about change—a change of direction, a change of focus, a change of orientation. It's about turning back to God, returning to your best self, turning away from the things that separate or distract you from who you are called to be.

In Jesus' case, his message of repentance came after his experience in the desert, an experience we commemorate each year in the season of Lent. Coming right on the heels of Jesus' baptism, that time in the wilderness was a stripping-away of all that was not essential, a time of refocusing on the core of who he was, on what it meant for him to be God's beloved child. Similarly, in the season of Lent, we have an opportunity to reorient our minds, our hearts, our lives toward the core of who we are—beloved, blessed, and called forth to be a blessing.

And so, today, on this first Sunday of Lent, in the spirit of *metanoeo* and *teshuvah*, I invite you to think for a few moments about repentance. What are the things that you would like to change? What are the things that God would like you to change? What would it look like for you to turn back to God? What would it look like for you to look forward in hope and commitment?

What are the things that distract you from being the person God calls you to be, from living a life centered in your identity as God's beloved? What do you need to turn away from? What is in your mind and heart that needs to change?

In a moment, we will pass around slips of paper like this. When the baskets reach you, please take one, and write on it something that is holding you back, separating you from God—something from which you need to repent. And then, when you're ready, come forward and send that obstacle up in smoke, like this.

First, a word about safety. This is special paper called flash paper. It will burn very quickly and very easily. All you need to do when you come forward is touch the edge of the paper to the flame, lift it into the air, and let go. It will be gone in a flash. Don't hold on to it—your fingers don't want to be part of the flash, I promise you. And please give the person in front of you a little space so that you don't accidentally get caught up in the flash of her repentance.

Friends, let us repent. Think for a moment; pray for a moment; ask God to help you; then write down your repentance and come burn it away.

Here we go.