

The Beginning of the Good News
December 14, 2008

Mark 1:1-8:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

One: This is the Word of the Lord. All: **Thanks be to God!**

In my Doctor of Ministry course this fall, we have read David Bartlett’s book What’s Good About This News. Bartlett has opened my eyes to see this text in an exciting new way. The first sentence of Mark’s Gospel is, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” I have read that sentence many, many times and have always thought Mark is simply introducing his book. I completely missed how this first sentence actually functions more like a title or a thesis statement for the entire gospel narrative. Bartlett argues that Mark’s entire book is intended to be a beginning. All sixteen chapters in Mark’s Gospel really function as the first chapter in a story with many, many chapters that Christians have continued for two thousand years.¹ Mark is testifying to us about the Jesus he knows and invites us to participate in our own adventure of faith. That means that God’s story with us is not done. So when we read about who Jesus was and what he did in Mark, it helps us understand who he is now and what is he currently doing in our lives.

How do we discover what God is doing now? And how do we prepare for Christmas? If you are anything like me, you have been putting up your tree, decorating, buying presents, wrapping them, and sending out Christmas cards. John the Baptist would tell us that we prepare for Christ’s coming by repenting. Repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, which means that we turn completely around, do an about face. Repentance involves our entire selves: hearts, bodies, and souls. The way of Jesus is hard; it can involve giving up things that we really do not want to.

Two fellows, Charlie and Lester, opened a butcher shop and prospered. They were making big profits. Then an evangelist came to town, and Lester became a Christian. He tried to persuade his partner to accept the gospel also, but to no avail.

¹ David Bartlett, What’s Good About This News?, p. 52.

“Why won’t you, Charlie?” asked his partner. “Listen, Lester,” the other butcher said. “If I get religion, too, who’s going to weigh the meat?”

One of my favorite television shows is “The Office,” an offbeat comedy about the unusual people who work together in a paper company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. This past Thursday, the office held a Christmas party.² Meredith, who everyone knows has a drinking problem, has too much to drink and starts dancing around wildly. She catches her hair on fire and Dwight, one of her co-workers, has to use a fire extinguisher to put out the fire. Michael Scott, the well-meaning office manager who often puts his foot in his mouth, decides it is time for an intervention. Michael confronts Meredith in front of the entire office, but Meredith is unwilling to admit she is an alcoholic or that she needs to make any kind of change. So Michael calls Meredith to her office, while everyone outside the door mumbles he is wasting his time and he will not be able to convince her. Michael walks out of his office and asks a co-worker for the address to a rehab facility. After Michael and Meredith leave, the office is shocked and amazed that he could convince her to get help.

After the commercial break, Michael is driving Meredith in his car and she asks him which bar they are going to. He is trying to trick her! When they pull up to the treatment facility and she realizes where he has taken her, she screams and tries to run away from him. Michael eventually tackles her and brings her inside; Michael does not realize that Meredith has to give her permission to enter rehab, so he ends up driving her home. That episode of “The Office” comically shows how vehemently we resist changing our ways, even when it would help us.

John the Baptist is uncompromising in his commitment to repentance. He invited his followers to turn from their old way of life so that they could be baptized and live in community, fully committed to serving God. John is not talking about an easy faith that his followers could abandon when it became inconvenient. You may be aware that all mainline Protestant denominations, including Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians are dealing with declining memberships. Fewer people today seem committed to the church than they were a generation or two ago; it is a tempting for those of us who are church leaders to try to make Christianity not too demanding to entice those who are not active to become active in the life of the church. John reminds us that God does not want half-hearted followers. God longs for disciples to turn to the Lord and love God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our soul, and all our strength. Of course, none of us will love God perfectly, but God deserves our best and most sincere effort, not our leftovers.

John the Baptist’s message resonated with his original audience. The historian Josephus noted that Herod Antipas was impressed by the crowds coming to John the Baptist, who became a national phenomenon. Herod likely feared these large crowds, worrying that that could have the power to lead a political revolution, so Herod eventually had John thrown into prison. All the Jews were talking about this wild-eyed man who was living out in the wilderness, eating wild honey and locusts. If we saw John

² I am describing an episode of “The Office” that originally aired on NBC on December 11, 2008.

the Baptist today, we would likely dismiss him as a lunatic street preacher. If we invited John over for dinner, I expect he would ask us to repent, as we are squirming, thinking that this dinner guest does not understand that he has strayed from polite table conversation.

The task of a Christian who repents is similar to the job of a sailor who is navigating her sailboat. Most of us here today have repented and turned towards God at some point in our lives, but our job is no more finished than a sailor who initially turns her boat in the right direction. Her sailboat, while it starts off on the right track, will end up in the completely wrong direction if she does not pay attention and readjust the sailboat. The wind changes, the waves batter the ship, and the currents pull it in new directions; before she knows it, her boat sails far off course. To be committed to repentance means that we are open to asking ourselves over and over again. What is God's plan for my life? Am I still on course? What adjustments do I need to make?

Is true repentance possible? Can people change their ways? Yes, change is possible, but challenging. True repentance takes at least three things: courage, humility, and persistence. Repentance takes courage because it is risky to believe in ourselves: that God can give us the strength to make the change we hope to achieve. It is easier to doubt ourselves, easier to believe that even if we exert tremendous effort, it still will not make any difference.

Secondly, repentance takes humility because we have to admit to ourselves and to God that we are doing something wrong and need to change our ways. Confessing our sin does not mean that we are bad people: it just means we are normal. We all have room to grow. Even the most devout Christians lose their focus and need continually to rededicate themselves to following Christ.

Thirdly, repentance involves persistence. Smokers who are trying to quit can have a great day where they do not give into temptation once. But if they let down their guard the next day, they may end up smoking several cigarettes. True repentance requires repeated commitment over days, months, even years.

Repentance involves more dedication than I typically have for a New Year's Resolution. I begin every New Year promising myself how this year I'll get more exercise or pray more regularly, and often start the year with lots of energy and excitement; that energy wanes over time. True repentance is not fleeting. To repent, we need to persist in the face of failure. It is tempting to look at a momentary setback as a permanent failure, as a sign that we really are not going to be able to stick with it. To repent, we have to get back on our horse when we fall off and try again.

Charles Dickens's holiday classic A Christmas Carol is a story about true repentance. At the beginning of Dickens's tale, Ebenezer Scrooge is a grinch and he sees Christmas as an inconvenience. Scrooge takes comfort in his money and his witty insults, keeping people who try to love him at arm's length, but he really is not happy. It takes a dramatic event, the visits from the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, to wake him up and let him see what his life has become. For some people repentance happens gradually over time, but for many, including Scrooge, it takes a dramatic event to stir us from complacency. Scrooge's life, in many ways, is harder after he repents. He

has to treat all people with respect. Scrooge has to pay Bob Cratchitt, his employee, a fair wage. He is not allowed to always think of himself first. Scrooge life becomes much more challenging, but it also becomes full of joy. When we try to repent and re-center our lives, it will not be easy; but the payoff is the richness of experiencing God's blessings and joys.

A new band of Christians in Fiji showed that true repentance is possible. They have an unusual baptismal font. They hollowed out an old, stained rock and filled it with water to use for baptisms. The rock was once called Killing Rock because local cannibals used to sacrifice their victims on that rock. That place that used to bring death is now a place of life through the waters of baptism.³

With God's help, we can repent and turn our lives around. Rather than simply looking out for ourselves, we can find greater joy by living a life that has purpose and meaning. Thanks be to God! Amen.

³ This story is told in James Moore's book, Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned But I Have Several Excellent Excuses, p. 99.