

1-5-2020 SERMON CCI Mark 1: 4-11 Who Needs Repentance?

During this period of the church year, in congregations all around the world, Christians are turning their attention to the Gospel stories in order to begin our journey to Jerusalem, to the cross, and to the glorious Easter story of the resurrection of Jesus. Every journey must have a beginning and all four gospels agree that it starts right here with John and his message that we need to repent.

Of course, three of the four gospels have a prequel to the gospel narrative. Matthew and Luke give us the lovely Christmas stories we know so well. And the Gospel of John begins with an equally lovely poem about how from time immemorial Jesus has been God's Word, who comes in human form to destroy the evil of darkness and be a light to all people. It's beautiful. And then there is Mark's Gospel. Now Mark just gets right to it. He begins with John standing in the middle of the Jordan River proclaiming a message of repentance and baptizing people willing to be cleansed of sin for righteousness sake.

Wait a minute: Repentance? Who needs repentance? Fifty years ago most sermons in churches were all about the need for people to repent. Today? Be honest. When was the last time you heard a sermon designed to get people to repent and believe that Jesus Christ is their savior? Isn't the prevailing view today more like: "Repentance? Hey, who wants to hear someone preach about human rottenness?"

So maybe it's a good question to ask Why do all four of the stories about good news begin with a message that sounds like bad news? Let's take a second look. In Mark's Gospel John is described as dressed in nothing but camel hair and just eating locusts and honey. The best image I can offer to explain this is to say it would have been like people living in Jerusalem going out to see a 19th century western mountain man dressed in bearskin, with a coonskin hat, who ate nothing but nuts and berries who was hooting and hollering about the sinfulness of city folk

I like Barbara Brown Taylor's take on this story. She says that the all the Gospel stories starts out with guy who is like a big old dog with a spikey collar who runs out and chomps on your ankles growling that you need to repent for coming in his yard. But John is growling that you need to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

He's **the Doberman pinscher of the Gospels**, a guard dog there at the outset to test everyone who thinks they want in: "What are you doing here? **Growl**. Who

told you that you could come sniffing around here. **Growl!** Wait! You say you're coming here because you want grace? **Growl!!!** Well, let me tell you something, buster, there's no cozying up to grace unless you feel the fire of judgment. **Growl!!!!!!** If you don't feel the fire of judgment, John says, then you won't feel the balm of grace either?"

John's business was **repentance**. It was what his baptism was all about. It was not about becoming a Christian, because John was not a Christian. When John waded into that water with people, he was simply cleaning them up for an audience with God, which he believed would take place very soon-- any day soon! He begged them to change their ways. And he was not beyond scaring them half to death if that's what it took-- anything to wake them up and make them see that they were **sleepwalking** through life, *confusing their ways with God's ways and accumulating sin like an empty house accumulates dust.*

He offered to hose them down, water them up, cool them off—to lay them out as if they'd been dead and buried, only to be raised up from that watery grave ready to be awake for God's coming judgment! In a nutshell, John's offer was "Repent so that the past will lose its power over you."

Repent!-- The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, meant to change one's mind, to turn from one's former ideas or choices toward new ideas and new choices. So, the word REPENT means to take steps to embrace the new way. But for most of us, the word **REPENT reeks of threat... not promise.**

The way we were taught, *repentance* means owning up to how rotten you are. It means saying, if only in the privacy of our own thoughts, that we are selfish, sinful, deeply defective human beings who grieve the heart of God by all the lousy things we can't seem to stop from doing.

In the way we were taught, repentance is not just saying you're sorry, but it has additional baggage: we are also supposed to believe that we are really a "**sorry lot**" as a person. This version of Repentance tells us that we have to dump whatever pride we may have in who we are right out on the ground and then stomp on it. We have to get rid of pride, and arrogance, and ego, and success, and any stories we may be carrying around that other people may be proud of us or believe in us. DUMP IT OUT and STOMP on it because PRIDE is the root of all evil. We're not just supposed to be sorry. We're supposed to admit we are a sorry lot, RIGHT?

But what if pride isn't the problem, or ego? or arrogance? or even being a sorry lot? What if what most of us need to repent of is not arrogance, but our utter despair that there is any hope that things could ever change for us? Don't most of us really believe, deep down, that no matter what we say or what we do, nothing really changes? That when push comes to shove, the leopard really can't change his spots and nothing really will change for us either... That deep down we know we've made a mess of it and there really isn't any hope, no beginning again, no chance for new possibilities.

What if it is really despair we need to REPENT of? In an age of cynicism like the one we live in, do you think more people are dead to the idea of wanting God to changes their lives, or ***just dead to believing that anything can really change who and what they are?***

Do you know any people who have just given in to ***the sin of cynicism that is nothing more than despair that anything will every change?*** I have known people who suffer from despair. And I can say that I know more of them than I know people who live in fear of eternal judgment.

Like the woman who was abused as a young girl by her father and twenty years later, she still can't take communion because no matter what the therapists say, she still believes it was her sin, too-- a sin she believes is unforgivable. And so her family co-exists with a wife and mother who lives in despair that forgiveness would ever make any difference. **Despair.**

Like the man who loses his job of twenty years and agrees to stay home and take care of the housework while his wife bumps her part-time work up to full-time. But the kids are mostly grown and don't need him and after a half a year of going to weekly interviews he realizes that he doesn't really have transferrable job skills and no one really wants to hire a man over 40 to start a new career. In recent months, he has stopped bothering going out on job interviews. After six months of rejection, he knows what the answer is already. **Despair.**

Like the teenager who doesn't know why he lives for the moment without regard of consequences. Dad is not home much and mom turns every discussion into a lecture, and the school counselor doesn't get it either. So, he hangs with the people that accept him just as he is, who are glad to hang with him. When he's arrested for shoplifting no one seems surprised. His parents are just angry that he's getting in TROUBLE, not that he's stealing things. So, he gets a tattoo of the word "Trouble." That's all he is, right? **Despair.**

When it comes to accepting God's grace in our lives which do you think is the real culprit keeping us at arm's length from God? Our personal pride or our personal despair? Like a cure for the common cold, when it comes to repentance, I think what's needed most of all is a cure for the all too common human failing of **despair**.

What would repentance as PROMISE look like? Think of the kind of vows we make in our baptisms. The Book of Common Prayer used in many different denominations says that during an adult baptism this is what the minister should ask the person being baptized:

Q: " Will you persevere in resisting evil and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"

A: And they are to respond: "I will, with God's help."

Notice that this vow is **NOT** about keeping an eye on our rottenness. It's about keeping an eye on our despair and never letting it get the better of us. In other words, the choice to repent is to commit to **NOT give up on ourselves** no matter how many times we have to repent again.

REPETANCE means we are committing ourselves to telling the truth that we believe in God's possibilities more than the impossibility of despair. And if that means every day anew, then every day anew it is, because God doesn't run out of possibilities. It means we give up on the word "never"-- that we'll never say never about God's possibilities. It means we give up on saying things like, "I'll never recover." "I'll never get it." "I'll never learn." Why? Because we believe in God's goodness more than we believe in our own badness. We believe that by the grace of God—something we experience because we repented—we can trust God no matter how big the challenge is.

One message of repentance, **the revolting kind**, is focused on the sin: It's the kind of repentance that most of us shrink from that is all about us, all about us as rotten, miserable sinners. The other message of Repentance, **the healing kind**, is focused on God: It's the kind of repentance that spends more time looking to the kingdom of God to see who we can be than looking in the mirror to see who we have been.

This kind of repentance has more faith in God's power to make us new than in our power to mess up. And it is this second kind of repentance, the repentance of a fresh start that John the Baptist offered as a way to prepare for the coming of

the Lord. He offered it as a ***beginning not an end, as an opportunity not as a threat***. He knew that someone was coming who had something much more potent to offer—the Holy Spirit. So, he was content to be the watchdog, nipping at our heels to get our attention: “Wake up buddy! There’s a train coming through and you better make the decision to shape up if you want to catch a ride...”

Do you think anyone was more surprised than John, when he looked up one day to see who was wading to him through the water? Not an ax-wielding lumberjack ready to put the ax to the root of the tree, not a pitchfork-wielding farm hand ready to burn the wheat from the chaff, not even a bigger, meaner, Doberman Pincher guard dog—But a man whose words were so filled with God’s possibilities of newness that even John saw in him all the hope he needed for himself—**all the promise of God for the world**.

He said, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” And Jesus replied ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill God’s righteousness.’ This is the one about whom John tells us that he is: “More powerful than I, 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.”

Something very powerful is offered in this **repentance at the outset of the Gospels**? Any unworthiness we may have, as John reminds us, is only in the face of who Jesus really is and the gift of God’s grace he makes possible to all who would repent of their despair.

And why did Jesus need to be baptized by John? We only get confused about why Jesus needed John’s baptism if we keep thinking that **REPENTANCE** is a response to threat. Imagine what could happen if we see the call to **REPENT** as our response to God’s **promise**, especially God’s promise to baptize us in the Holy Spirit who truly can help us rise above all the things that can lead to despair in our lives. If **repentance** is about the **possibility of promise** rather than the **disempowering choice of despair**, then the question really is Could Jesus have started his ministry *any other way*?

Who needs repentance? I tell you what. I know I do. I need it every day I do. What about you? Do you need to believe that God’s promise is possible in your life? Who needs repentance? What about you?

Amen? Amen.

Guest Speaker: Rev. Dr. Robert Reid