

WHY REPENT IN LENT?

Psalm 25:1-5 and Mark 1:9-15

It was in an old country church in the mountains of North Carolina, one of the churches which still held a Prayer Meetin' every Wednesday night for an hour before Choir practice. And there was always a time of prayer –during which anyone present could offer prayer and many often did. One man, old Mr. Groff, well into his late eighties, offered the same prayer every week, "Lord, my sins are like unwanted cobwebs. Take the cobwebs from my life." After many years of hearing this same prayer week after week, one Wednesday night, when old Mr. Groff again prayed, "Lord, my sins are like unwanted cobwebs. Take the cobwebs from my life.," old Mrs. Weston, well into her nineties, followed his prayer with, "Yes, Lord, take away those cobwebs, and this time, kill the spider!"

The point I think Mrs. Weston was making – if we put it in theological terms – is that our Confession should involve an honest commitment to Repent and a commitment to follow through by living a life that does not continue the same sins. That in our Confession of our sin there should be a commitment to follow through with actions which change us in ways that the same cobwebs don't continue to be there week after week.

I heard it put this way in a sermon many years ago – in an illustration very appropriate since tomorrow is President's Day. We have all heard the story – since childhood of the cherry tree that was cut down in the yard of the Washington home, and when George Washington's father asked him if he did it, George confessed saying, "It was I who cut down the cherry tree." To which his father responded, "Okay, you confessed. You cut down the cherry tree, now, what are you going to do about it?"

That's why we REPENT in Lent – and in every other season of the year. Because we have done some things which we should not have done or left undone some things we should have done – and we acknowledge and confess that sin – and then – then what. We repent and that repentance leads us to actions which move us forward in our Christian journey, bring us into a closer, more intimate relationship with God, and allow us to live in greater harmony with others.

There's a Presbyterian Church in Cooleemee, North Carolina – just a little church a few miles from Unity Presbyterian Church in Woodleaf which Jackie and I served for many years – and I preached at the Cooleemee Church many times – and it was always humbling to walk into that church because over the front door

of the church – the one everyone entered – was a sign that read “For sinners only”.

That’s why we Repent in Lent, because we know that we have sinned and we need to make changes – and even when we do, we continue to sin and need to Repent again and again.

In a sermon he preached on the First Sunday in Lent in 2012, our son Chris related this story: “For many years, each spring semester, the late Reynolds Price, professor of English at Duke University and noted novelist and poet, taught a small group seminar titled, simply, “The Gospels.” It was consistently one of the most competitive classes in the curriculum during registration, with a waiting list that grew by the hour. The class centered on close readings of the gospels of Mark and John, which the course description venerated as ‘documents largely unprecedented in world literature.’ After studying these two gospels, students began the one assignment that the class required--an **original** gospel of 30-50 pages, based on the readings and discussion of the seminar. As you might imagine, students panicked. I had more than one friend who went without sleep night after night as the deadline approached! How can one possibly write an original gospel? What must be included and what can be left out? How do you convey the deep meaning of the life of Jesus in your own words? Where do you begin?”

Chris continues, “This daunting, overwhelming challenge was precisely what faced Mark as he sat down with pen and parchment to record his story of the life of Jesus. He began without precedent or guide, simply convinced that the story must be told; and tell it he does, in dramatic and rapidly unfolding fashion.”

As we have seen in recent weeks, Mark has no time for a lengthy introduction that eases listeners into his narrative. No space for a story of a miraculous birth in Bethlehem or a detailed listing of Jesus' family tree. Instead, readers are cast almost immediately into the wilderness where John the Baptizer appears, preaching repentance, change, and forgiveness of sins. No sooner does John predict the coming of the Messiah than Jesus arrives on scene. All of Advent and Preparation and Christmas in the eight frantic verses which precede our text today. Mark proceeds at an almost breathless pace, barely pausing to describe characters or setting, so focused is he on the plot itself, so compelled to tell the gospel story in his own words.

And what is the opening message of the gospel – the good news story of Jesus. It's a message calling for repentance. In the 4th verse of the first chapter John the Baptizer appears "in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance" and 10 verses later, after John is arrested, Jesus comes 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.'"

Why Repent in Lent? Because from the very beginning of John's mission and the very beginning of Jesus' ministry we hear the proclamation to REPENT. There must be something critical about repenting in the hearing and believing and living of the good news.

Anticipation is high when Jesus arrives at the Jordan River, where John has been preaching and baptizing and propheticizing. The dramatic climax of the scene is the baptism of Jesus, complete with descending dove and a voice from heaven that declares his divinity. And Jesus – fully divine, with no need of repentance and no need of the cleansing waters of Baptism – is baptized to demonstrate the urgency and necessity of repentance. It was that important to Jesus and that is why we Repent in Lent.

Our son Chris, in writing about his "original Gospel" written for that class in college, wrote, "In my original, optimistic gospel for Professor Price's class, this scene would set the stage for a mega-ministry, with vast popular appeal and a steadily growing impact over the state of affairs in Galilee and even in Rome, the very center of the world. After all, Jesus' baptism takes away any doubt that he is the Son of God. From this moment, his power should be unquestioned. Justice should roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. This moment of divine recognition should cause Caesar to hand over his crown or cower in fear. This wilderness baptism is the perfect beginning to a world-changing story."

And I would add, a life-changing story for each of us!

But this is what is so frustrating about Mark's Gospel. Jesus' life and his ministry are not marked by immediate success or recognition of divine authority. Instead, the same Spirit who descended at his baptism drives Jesus farther out into the wilderness, where he will spend forty days tempted by Satan, surrounded only by wild beasts and angels. No multitudes. No fan club. No posse of protectors

or admirers. The ministry of Jesus, like the Gospel of Mark, begins in the wilderness – and with a call to REPENT. And that why we REPENT in Lent.

So we now come to the beginning of Lent in our Christian year. We commence this sacred season of reflection and renewal, of spiritual discipline and REPENTANCE, in the wilderness. It is the place where pretense fades away and honest vulnerability becomes possible. In the wilderness, we are unable to keep up the public image of effortless perfection that plagues us. We are freed to confess the messy reality of our lives. We are tempted to forget the promises of God, we are threatened by the danger of the unknown, and all the while we are watched and waited on by the divine. The wilderness, like it or not, is where we live our lives. It is the place between certainty and doubt, between hope and fear, between promises made and promises kept, between life and death. In the wilderness, Jesus finds his voice and his vocation, and when he emerges forty days later, his words echo those of the Baptizer: the kingdom of God has come near; REPENT; believe.

It has been observed by many that Mark is the only gospel writer who gives his book a title. In the first verse of the first chapter, Mark declares that this story is "the beginning of the good news." It is such a hopeful title, especially in our time when there seems to be so little hope and helpfulness; a time when we cry out in horror at another mass murder in one of our schools and see little hope that it will end; a time when truth and compassion and compromise seem so often to be things of the past. We pray daily that we would hear more good news and that more good would come and less evil - somehow, someday. If Mark's story and Jesus' life are just the beginning of the gospel, then we have reason to believe in more than what now surrounds us. If this is *only the beginning*, we can strain our eyes and stand on tiptoe as we look for more good news that is sure to follow.

But that good news must be preceded by REPENTANCE. We cannot truly share and live good news until we have repented of the evil that is in us and have acknowledged our part in the "bad news" around us.

Jesus' life was full of adversity and suffering and defeat. He did not replace all unjust earthly rulers or lift all the lowly and oppressed. Sometimes the two thousand years that have passed since seem to have brought little change as well. We watch in horror of needless deaths, unending violence, innocent suffering, justice denied. All around us are those who lack the basic necessities of life, who

go hungry or live in fear, whose grieving is unceasing, whose isolation is unbearable. In the wilderness of our lives, we hurt one another, break promises, accept lies as truth, fail to love our neighbors and refuse to treat others as better than ourselves. The kingdom has not yet arrived in its fullness; we can be sure of that. No, we seem to be stuck, year after year, sacred season upon sacred season, at the beginning of the gospel. This means that the moment of God's breakthrough in Jesus Christ has just begun and is not yet entirely visible.

Still, even out here in the wilderness, there are times when God's presence is unmistakable. Moments when the extraordinary breaks through the thin veneer of the ordinary and blinds us with its brilliance, when angels outnumber wild beasts. Those moments come when we face the fear of the wilderness and gather the courage and the strength to take the next step, moments when the kingdom comes near.

Many years ago, I was with a group of pastors and lay leaders from our community. We were gathered to get to know each other better and to share our faith stories. There were Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians. That day the facilitator ask, "How did you become a Christian? Where did your faith journey begin?" One by one, members of the group described how we had been raised by loving and faithful parents who brought us to Sunday school and church, told us the stories of Jesus, and helped us to grow in maturity of faith. Each story sounded something like that, until there was only one person left to speak. As tears formed in her eyes, she said, "I am a Christian because the Christian church saved my life." Suddenly, the chatty group fell silent. She described how she had been abandoned by her parents as an infant. Sent to a foster home, she was neglected and abused for the first six years of her life. At age seven, she was adopted by a local family. Not knowing what to expect, she spent the first night wide-awake in her new bed, afraid and anxious. The next morning, a Sunday, the family got up early, had breakfast, and got into the car. She said, "It was my first time in a church and I had no idea what to expect. We walked into the Sunday school classroom, and the teacher's face lit up. 'Welcome, Janet, we've been waiting for you.' Then she read the Bible story for the day. I will never forget the feeling. Jesus says to his disciples, 'Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them.' I knew, knew with all of my heart, that he was talking to me. I knew that I was home. I am a Christian because of that moment. A new beginning, the kingdom in the midst of the wilderness.

As we set out on this Lenten journey, remember the truth of your baptism: you are claimed; you are chosen as God's beloved; you are empowered to set out in search of your voice and your vocation. The work is not easy in this wilderness called life. But the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is this: in him the time has been fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near. Our human lives have been invaded by the presence of the Divine and nothing will ever be the same. Jesus came forth from his wilderness proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; REPENT and believe the good news." That's why we REPENT in Lent.

Let us pray: O God of new beginnings, walk with us on this wilderness journey, that we may truly REPENT and reach the joy of your resurrection with changed hearts and renewed minds. Amen.