

January 24, 2021  
Mark 1:14-20

Epiphany 3  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Repent and Receive”

“The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.”

Among my favourite childhood memories are the summers we spent at my aunt and uncle’s cottage on Culver Lake. I loved everything about it: the bunk beds where I slept, the fireplace that allowed me to gather wood and build blazing fires in the evening; Dale’s Market where we would go for the daily papers and ice cream sandwiches. But I especially enjoyed the time I spent in the water, swimming to the floating dock and exploring the lakeshore in the rowboat and canoe. But while those were very carefree days, there were some rules that needed to be followed, especially in and around the water. I never went swimming alone, even though I was a strong swimmer; I always needed to make sure that an adult was nearby. When we got into one of the boats, we needed to stay within range of the cottage, both so that my parents and family could see us and so that we could hear them when they wanted us to come ashore. It was important that we stayed in range so that we could be watched and so that we could hear the voices of the people who loved us and wanted us to stay safe as we were enjoying all that Culver Lake had to offer.

Staying in range remained an important part of my life even when we were back home. Before I left the house, my parents needed to know where I was going, even if it was down the street to play with my friends. When I went away to university, we had a set time when we would phone every week to stay in touch. Although my parents never had a cell phone or the internet, we would always find ways to stay in range so that we could watch out and support each other, because if we lost that connection, we would also lose the loving support that is such a critical part of any close, caring relationship.

We have learned the important of staying in range as this pandemic has forced us to find new ways to stay connected. Our increasing reliance on the internet compels us to stay in range of a strong Wi-Fi connection, because when we get out of range, we also lose contact with people and groups on Zoom calls and private chats. We need to stay in range with people with whom we are not able to visit in person through phone calls, text messages, and even written letters, because if we fall out of range with them, we lose those vital connections that are so important for our physical and mental health. Being in range of sources of connection is critical for our survival through these dark and difficult days of uncertainty and fear.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Mark shares the story of the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, which commences “*after John [the Baptist] was arrested*” (Mark 1:14). The arrest and eventual martyrdom of John are forerunners of Jesus’ own fate, a foreshadowing of Christ’s arrest and death on the Cross for the sake of all humanity.

Having been introduced by the heavenly voice at his baptism as “*my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*” (1:11), the one who will embody the Holy Spirit and reverse the story of sinful

humanity, Jesus' public ministry can begin when "*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.'*" (1:14-15). Jesus' opening message combines John the Baptist's preaching of repentance with a phrase that would have been familiar to Mark's readers from early Christian preaching: "*believe in the good news,*" another word for "gospel." His announcement "*the time is fulfilled*" indicates that Jesus' ministry will bring about the age of salvation anticipated in John's prediction that "*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*" (1:7-8).

- "The word for 'time' is *Kairos*, signifying an opportune time and decisive moment because God is about to act. It has eschatological implications. The word for 'fulfilled' is a verb in passive which conveys the idea that the implicit subject is God, who had caused this to happen." – Osvaldo Vena.

Jesus follows his announcement that "the time is fulfilled" with the proclamation that "the kingdom of God has come near." This announcement proclaims that the coming of Jesus fulfills God's plan for history. At this time and place, God has stepped into human history in a unique and decisive way, a turning point in which "*the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.*" (Revelation 11:15). The kingdom of God will be at the heart of Jesus' preaching (many of his parables begin with the phrase "the kingdom of God is as though ..."), a proclamation that the kingdoms of the world that have ruled by domination and fear will be replaced by the Kingdom of God in which God's love and peace will reign.

- "What he seems to be saying is that the Kingdom of God is the time, or a time beyond time, when it will no longer be humans in their lunacy who are in charge of the world but God in his mercy who will be in charge of the world. It's the time above all else for wild rejoicing – like getting out of jail, like being cured of cancer, like finally, at long last, coming home. And it is at hand, Jesus says." – Frederick Buechner.

Jesus' proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God is followed by a summons, a challenge to his followers to "*repent, and believe in the good news.*" Jesus uses the word "repent" in its meaning to "turn around," to stop following paths or ways of living that draw us out of the range of God's loving Word and return to the source of all blessing and strength. It is a repentance that is heard in the call of the prophet Joel to "*return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*" (Joel 2:13). It is a return that results in rejoicing when the waiting father welcomes home the prodigal son, calling on all to rejoice because "*this son of mine was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found!*" (Luke 15:24). It is a return that is celebrated when the leaders of the early church rejoice that "*God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life*" (Acts 11:18).

- "To prepare for the Lord's coming, people must make a radical return to God ... Turning to the Lord means turning away from all the voices calling us to walk some other path. The call of Jesus' first disciples, which follows this section, begins to spell out an important meaning of the way to discipleship." – PHEME PERKINS.

The call to repentance is the call to turn around, to shift the direction of their lives, to give our full attention to the kingdom that is coming, to believe in the good news of Jesus Christ; for “*where Jesus Christ is, there the rule, power, and kingdom of God is actively at work.*” (Perkins).

- “Repent and believe in the gospel, Jesus says. Turn around and believe that the good news that we are loved is gooder than we ever dared hope, and that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all things in this world the gladdest thing of all.” – Buechner.

The call to repent and believe – to turn around so that we might be in range to receive to Gospel message of Jesus Christ – is the call that Jesus extends to his first disciples when he encounters Simon and his brother Andrew along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and invites them to “*follow me and I will make you fish for people.*” (1:18), the result of which is “*immediately they left their nets and followed him.*” Jesus then encounters James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who also respond to his invitation to discipleship when they “*left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*” (1:20). The fact that these men drop both occupation and family obligations to follow the one who summons them demonstrates that their call comes from God. To the ancient reader, the summons to follow Jesus was an extraordinary disruption of a person’s life (“*Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’*” – 10:28); it might even have seemed offensive. If the labour of the sons was critical to the family business, a departure might appear to put the welfare of the whole family at risk.

Not everyone was so eager and willing to accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship. Mark tells the story of a man who runs up and kneels before Jesus, asking him “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (10:17), Jesus points him toward to Torah and its commandments: “*You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honour your father and mother.’*” (10:19). When the young man affirms that “*I have kept all these since my youth,*” Jesus looks upon him lovingly and says, “*You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*” (10:21). But unlike the brothers at the Sea of Galilee, the young man declines Jesus’ invitation, “*for he had many possessions.*” (10:22). He was unable or unwilling to repent, to turn away from that which he treasured to follow the one who offered “*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*” (1 Peter 1:4). He refuses to repent so that he might believe and receive the blessings of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

In another episode in John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of the blessing of the “*bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.*” (John 6:58). Jesus has identified himself as “*the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*” (6:35); but despite this offer of himself and his blessings to all who would believe and follow him, “*because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him*” (6:66). But among those who remained was Simon Peter, who speaks on behalf of the Twelve and all who accept Jesus’ call to discipleship: “*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.*” (6:68-69). These two episodes remind us that Jesus’ call to

follow him is an invitation, not a command; one is free to accept the call to repentance or to reject Jesus' words and continue down that path that leads one away from God, out of range of the life-giving Word of the Gospel, the Good News that in Jesus Christ are truly the words of eternal life from the one who is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

The call to repent and believe so that we might receive the blessings of God's Holy Word is the call we receive when we come to the waters of Holy Baptism, where we are "*reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ*" (ELW Holy Baptism). But to turn to the Lord and this gift of baptism, we must first repent in turning away from anything that would seek our allegiance or would draw us away from God. This is why we are asked to renounce these alternate avenues and allegiances when we are challenged with the traditional Three Renunciation in our service of Holy Baptism:

- "Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?"
- "Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?"
- "Do you renounce that ways of sin that draw you from God?"

When we declare that "*I renounce them,*" we are publicly stating our intention to repent, to turn away from anything that would draw us away from God, out of range of God's steadfast love and abiding presence. We are publicly affirming that "*I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back, no turning back.*"

- "Evil is thus rejected in order to make room for the affirmation of God; they are two sides of one action. In the ancient church this was a dramatic time: the candidate, facing the west and the setting sun, renounced all the forces of darkness, and then turned toward the east and the rising sun (Son) and professed faith in God ... the candidates, having rejected evil, the evil one, and all his empty promises, turn and profess the faith of the church as summarized in the ancient baptismal creed." – Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli.

Turning away from all that would draw us away from God – what Luther summarized as "*sin, death, and the power of the devil*" – is at the heart of the call of Christ to each of us, the invitation to discipleship that consists of repenting of following other paths and returning so that we might believe in the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ and receive the blessings that are showed upon those who repent and return the Lord who is indeed "*gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*" It is good news for all who have heeded Christ's call and turned around; "*for you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*" (1 Peter 2:25).

- "If we want to grow in confidence and to be strengthened and comforted, we must learn to recognize the voice of our shepherd and to ignore all other voices that lead us into error, chasing us and driving us here and there. And we must listen to and comprehend this article alone that sets Christ before us more kindly and helpfully than anyone could paint him. Hence we can say with full confidence, 'My Lord Jesus Christ is the one and only shepherd, and I am, alas, the lost sheep that has gone astray.'" – Martin Luther, 1532.

Jesus calls us to repent so that we might turn around from those voices that would lead us into error so that we might come back into the range of the voice of our loving shepherd, the shepherd and guardian of our souls whose voice is the sound of blessing and the voice of assurance:

- “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” – John 10:2-5.

I was not always happy about the restrictions that were placed upon me when I ventured out onto the waters of Culver Lake. Keeping within range was something I often found restrictive, since I wanted to be free to explore beyond the limits that the adults on shore had set. But I know that paddling out of range could have been dangerous, because some parts of that lake were very treacherous and could have easily put me in danger. Keeping in range was an expression of the love of my family who wanted me to be safe as I enjoyed our favourite summertime spot.

Our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to repent not as a way of punishing or restricting us, but so that we might return to “*source of all blessing and the God of all consolation*” (2 Corinthians 1:3), so that we might hear the Word of eternal life that our Lord and Saviour showers upon us, so that we might believe in the good news and come into range to receive this blessed assurance. The call to repentance is a call to renewal, a call to be in range of the Word of God that in these dark and uncertain times is the true source of light and life; for in the call to repent and receive is our assurance that God’s Word is “*a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*” (Psalm 119:105).

Amen.