

**“A Short Sermon”**  
**Mark 1:9-15, Psalm 25:1-10**  
**February 18, 2018**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

**To repent is to change, to try a new direction. That direction is following Jesus.**

When I took my first preaching class at Princeton Seminary, they were teaching us that a good sermon had an introduction, three points, and a conclusion. If it was a really good sermon, it had a poem right before the conclusion. Later on someone told me that the true measure of a good sermon is that it had an introduction and a conclusion and those two things should be very close together. If that is true, then Jesus was a wonderful preacher. Our lesson today says that Jesus came proclaiming the good news. Well, that's what every preacher should do, proclaim the good news. If you leave worship without ever hearing the good news, then we haven't done our job. The first purpose, the first great end of the church in Presbyterian parlance, is the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. The proclamation of the good news. That's what we're supposed to be about. Every Sunday. Every sermon, no matter how long or short it is. Jesus could certainly do that with an economy of words: “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” That's it. That's his sermon. Repent and believe in the good news. Ok, everybody, thanks for coming . . .

Probably we'd better take a few minutes to decide what those words mean for us.

“Repent.” Not a common Presbyterian word, it smacks for us too much of tent revivals and altar calls and things we aren't comfortable with as God's frozen chosen. Repent. It's not a nice quiet intellectual word that we can ponder and discuss over lunch. It's a word that seems to push at us, seems to pull us away from what we've been doing. Repent. It's an active word, but then this a passage that is more active than we usually like to imagine. The heavens were torn apart and the dove came upon him, and then the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he came back proclaiming “Repent and believe.”

What does it mean to repent? In Greek the word here is “metanoeite.” It means to change, to turn

around. To look at the direction that you've been going and change to a new way. The psalm we read this morning is about the ways of God, that the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness. Are those the paths that we walk? If they are not, then we are supposed to repent, to change the way we are going.

“The first word that Jesus speaks in Mark's Gospel is “metanoeite!” Why? Because in Jesus, God makes it possible for God's people to do more than rerun the past. That is the gospel, the good news, the glad tidings toward which Jesus invites us to stop, turn or turn again, and hold on to for dear life. “Metanoeite,” says our Lord, “things do not have to stay the way they are now!” In fact, to follow Jesus means that things cannot stay the way they are.”

That scares me. I don't know about you, but I like stability. I like the way things are. I like even better the way things were. Repent, means to go someplace new. To lots of us that's not good news. Some of us spend our lives insisting that things stay just the way they are, we expend every ounce of energy making sure that things remain the same. Sometimes it's the preachers who say that, sometimes it's the folks in the pews, sometimes it's the community around us. But the call to repent means that change is necessary. The kingdom has come near—the king has come near, and if we are going to follow that king, if we, like those first disciples are going to hear his voice, then we need to look around us and see if we are going in the right direction, see if we are really following him. Repent, *metanoeite*, change. Jesus calls us constantly to change because he is constantly calling us to reach out to someone new, to keep growing, to keep loving. What do you need to change? Are you following him? Is there something that is keeping you from following him?

Of course one of the requirements of repentance is forgiveness.

As we begin this season of repentance, we are reminded that our forgiveness is conditional. It depends on our capacity and our willingness to forgive... to purge ourselves of grudges, resentments, hatreds... the poisons that destroy families, friendships, communities, nations. The Episcopal priest, David Sellery says, “My father-in-law recently joked that he had “Irish Alzheimer's”... He said he forgets

everything but grudges. Unfortunately, this is a condition not limited to the Celts. How many slights are still fresh in our minds? How many wounds do we carry around with us waiting for payback time? What a burden. What a waste. Hate harms the hated, but it destroys the hater. Failure to forgive makes us slaves to the past and blind to the future.

To jump start Lent... to repent... we must clean out our spiritual attics and basements. We must dump the spiteful junk that has been piling up... reminding us of past slights and festering humiliations. We must let in the fresh air and the sunlight of grace. We must forgive. Then see what a difference it makes... to be refreshed and renewed... to confidently await the coming of the risen Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you have things that are holding you back from following Christ? Grudges that you haven't given up? Prejudices that are too precious to you? Ways of doing things that you think it would be too hard to change?

But I think we also need to point out that when Jesus calls us to “Repent”, that *metanoete* is a plural verb, it means repent, but not “repent each of you,” but rather “repent all of you.” It means that repentance involves more than just you, more than just me. The modern way of looking at things has often made “repent and believe” as something that you do, something that I do, in the privacy of our own interior lives, in our own hearts and souls. But this isn't just that. It's not just me and Jesus. Jesus walks with you, but not just you. Jesus is here with you, but not just you. The Christian life is lived in community. There are no “lone ranger Christians.” The call to our community is also to repent, to turn around, to change.

What things do we need to change as a community? Are we as caring as we could be? Are we welcoming to the stranger? Do we give sacrificially? Do we nurture one another's spiritual growth or are we only concerned about ourselves? When we sit down in a session meeting or a committee meeting or a deacon's meeting or whatever group you are part of in the church, do you ask yourself,

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1 Sellery, David. *The Episcopal Cafe*. February 17, 2015



“Are we seeking the mind of Christ? What would Jesus have us do? Where would Jesus have us go?”

Not always the easy questions to ask as a community. But what changes could we make? We are in this together. We travel this journey of faith together. And maybe that’s true for us not just as a church community, but as a national church, as a nation even. The events of this last week, the shooting on Ash Wednesday tell us that we need to be making changes as a nation, that the way we are going does not work, that our children are not safe. What do we do? I can’t say that I know the answers, only that the way we are going isn’t it. Repent. Change. Go another direction. Doing nothing isn’t the way.

And let me also point out, if you haven’t had enough of a Greek grammar lesson today that the verb *metanoete*, is in the present tense. It carries with it the idea of continuous action. We don’t repent and we’re done. Gary Charles, pastor at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, writes, “You don’t just repent once and be done with it. Would it not be wonderful if all our fresh starts would result in totally changed people and churches and nations? We know better. No sooner are New Year’s resolutions made than they are broken. No sooner do we promise to be a kinder and gentler nation that we act in ways that portray anything but kindness and gentleness. No sooner do we paint the church as a place of high moral virtue than other leader is arrested for an immoral act, even while the church closes its doors to the human need on its doorstep.”<sup>2</sup>

Repent, and keep repenting. Change and keep changing. Reform and always reforming. That should be us. We need to keep looking to see that we are following Jesus. This may have been a short sermon, but it is a long road to become the people of God. But that is who we are and who we are becoming. Repent, as individuals. Repent as a community. And keep repenting. I guess I did have the Princeton three points. Maybe I should have passed that preaching class. I guess keep trying this preaching thing. And as we travel together through Lent, let’s keep trying this repenting thing. Let’s keep following Jesus together.

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2 Charles, Gary. *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*.