

**January 21, 2018 – Third Sunday after Epiphany**  
**“Repent! Are You Kidding Me?”**

**Rev. Dr. Scott Landis**  
**Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20**

The bulletin covers that you receive each Sunday as you enter church come from a subscription service and are published by our denomination. They are intended to complement the main scripture passage highlighted each Sunday. Usually, a beautiful photograph covers the front providing a pleasing visual for worshipers to center their attention as the service unfolds. The back of the bulletin typically offers a story or brief message also intended to complement the text. Sometimes it works and other times – well, you simply have to use your imagination a bit.

If you took time to read the back cover today – and I encourage you to do so LATER if you’ve not done so already – you may have found the illustration helpful. It begins by referencing an advertisement posted recently for a cashier at a northern California food co-op. The ad read: “*Wanted, people with a sense of urgency.*” As the writer observed, use of the word “urgency” obviously had a backstory.

Interestingly, he takes the idea in a different direction than today’s text does – opting to focus on the protecting and preserving the environment instead of Jesus’ call for discipleship. While that is a noble and essential idea, I’ll leave it for another day and another sermon.

What I want to focus on is the urgency that seems to be the central point of Mark’s gospel – a storyline that moves very rapidly in the first 14 verses from describing John the Baptist’s ministry of calling for repentance and baptizing in the river Jordan those who confessed their sins, to Jesus’ baptism by John, to his temptation in the wilderness, to today where he expresses his own sense of urgency challenging all who would pay attention: “Repent! And believe in the good news.” Why? “Because the kingdom on God has come near.”

Theologian Ted Smith states that, “Mark begins like an alarm clock, persistently declaring the time and demanding some response.”<sup>1</sup>

Well, I don’t know about you, but the problem with an alarm clock is not so much the urgency. I know I’ve gotta get up and get going when I hear the ring. Rather, it’s the demand that seems to accompany that sound – it’s the call to action – foisted upon me – to which I must respond upon hearing the alarm. That’s what unnerves me, especially if it involves doing something that I don’t necessarily want to do.

And that seems particularly relevant when I hear a command like, “Repent!” I mean, are you kidding me? It’s that command that causes a knee-jerk reaction as my Progressive

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Smith, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, p. 285.

Protestant sense of being is disturbed. But why? Isn't that what this come to Jesus thing is all about? Isn't that a requirement for discipleship? So why my reaction?

When you read the story, you might be as amazed as I at the responses recorded. Mark doesn't give us any information on the crowd's reaction to the imperative and urgent appeal of Jesus, but he does tell us about the call Jesus offers potential disciples. Simon and Andrew drop their nets and follow seemingly without giving it a second thought. James and John leave not only their nets, but also their father, walking away from all responsibility and societal expectation and follow in order to learn how to fish for people. It all seems so unlikely and so strange. That is if we conceive of this whole episode as an act of the will.

I want to plant the notion in your mind that this story is not about the disciples – rather, this is a story about God.

I see. I hear. I respond. Seemingly all of my own volition, and life is lived happily ever after. But hard as it is to admit, this is not about me.

It's the way we often hear these words being used – not by Jesus – but by others who feel it is their responsibility to get us to fall in line, and live “appropriate lives” – appropriate by some preconceived notion of what a holy life looks like. I've been to worship services where I've heard preachers (perhaps with noble intentions) insist that I repent – that is change my ways – because in their eyes I am not good enough “just as I am.”

In such a challenge, the onus of responsibility is placed entirely on me. Through an act of my will, I decide to change, to turn around, to believe, and to follow. Nothing really wrong with that, but it can very easily lead to a certain level of pride. “I did it. I changed my ways. God now looks favorably upon me. What's your story?”

I believe this is exactly why this story is coupled with that of the Hebrew prophet Jonah. Jonah's problem was more than he was just afraid of the Ninevites who he was trying to avoid. He also looked upon them with disdain. He had repented. They had not. He was righteous in his own eyes. They were wallowing in their ignorance. And he rather liked it that way. Why would he want to waste his time on them? [Pause]

When we are called to repent – after we get over ourselves and deal with our first responses – I wonder if we might reframe the whole notion from “turning from our evil ways or past mistakes” to the possibility of “wrapping our minds around a whole new reality” and the “new reality” is just what Jesus says, “The kingdom of God has already come near.” [Pause]

Repentance is not for some future outcome – be it a place in heaven or salvation from hell. Neither is it something we do of our own volition. Repentance is a way of life that can occur ONLY when we recognize the action of God. In fact, it is God who is actively pursuing us, guiding us, and encouraging us into a new identity. Repentance can only

occur because of what God is doing in our lives – affecting a change which we cannot. We cannot possibly do it ourselves.

And the urgency is due to the fact that God loves us so much – that God want us to begin enjoying our new identity in God – NOW! – not at some future moment in history.

The Good News is that the kingdom of God is already here – it's not some future event that we have to prepare for. The better news is that God is already active in our lives trying to help usher us into this new reality – the new identity – which may involve dropping our nets in order that we can move unencumbered into the places and spaces to which God is calling us.

Barbara Brown Taylor described the new reality – the new identity in this way, “Their minds were not on what they were leaving, but on what they were joining. Their hearts did not cleave to what was falling from their hands but to what they were reaching out to find, and in that “God-drenched” moment of their turning to follow, the miracle occurred: their lives flowed into the same direction as God’s life.”<sup>2</sup>

If we espouse that notion of repentance, we begin to see that it does not require our actively trying to change as much as it does yielding or surrendering to the action of God in our lives – of God seeking to purify our lives as we allow more and more of God’s presence in our lives.

That’s what gave Simon, Andrew, James and John not so much the ability as the desire to make this radical move in their lives. That’s what gave the early church the passion to speak boldly on behalf of this newly emerging faith in their lives. And it’s exactly what the church needs today if it has any chance of surviving the apathy and secular penchant of our times.

God is pursuing each one of us and longs for us to drop the nets that bind us so that we too might repent, believe, and embrace the new identity God has in mind for us as we welcome the good news – God’s kingdom is already here.

Amen

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p. 40.