

***Metanoia***  
**Mark 1:1-15**

**John W. Vest**  
**Ash Wednesday—12:10 Worship**  
**Fourth Presbyterian Church**

It is a strange synchronicity for us to be gathered here in this sanctuary to contemplate our mortality when parts of this church are currently being destroyed, literally turned into dust. I think this serves to remind us that this day is not all about us as individuals. Ash Wednesday, like so much in the worship life of the Reformed tradition, is not a solitary endeavor. It is a communal experience. We are gathered together. We will share prayers of penance. We will share bread and a common cup. We will share the sign of the cross, marked on us with ashes that symbolize our common humanity. It's not all about us as individuals. It's about us as community. It's about us and the kingdom of God.

As we ponder our mortality today, I invite you first to consider the meaning of repentance. On this day of confession and penance, listen to the very beginning of Mark's story of Jesus. Listen for the message of John the Baptist. Listen for Jesus' sojourn into the wilderness. Listen for the first words to come out of Jesus' mouth. Listen for God's word for us.

*[Mark 1:1-15 from the Common English Bible]*

Sometimes when you hear something said in a different way, it takes on a new or different meaning. Sometimes we need to hear familiar stories retold with fresh language.

This is why it is important, from time to time, for the church to produce a new translation of the Bible. We get used to the words we hear so frequently and we begin to take them for granted. When we hear the same words over and over, year after year, we think we know for certain what they mean.

The scripture I just read for you is from the Common English Bible, a new translation that is due out this year, the four-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible in 1611. This is an exciting translation. It has brought together the largest and most diverse group of translators to ever work on producing a readable version of the Bible in English. Translators, editors, and reading groups from around the church—including one from our own congregation—have contributed to it. It is “truly a Bible created by churches and for the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

When I first read the CEB version of this passage, I was struck by the new rendering of Jesus’ first public words: “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” Compare this to the New Revised Standard Version we are more familiar with: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” What I find most intriguing is the shift from “repent” to “change your hearts and lives”.

Repentance is one of the most loaded terms in the church’s lexicon, theologically loaded and also laden with the baggage of religious experience. Depending on the kind of Christianity in which you were raised, you may associate repentance with a red faced preacher piling on guilt, trying to bring you to a breaking point that induces some kind of personal conversion or return to the fold. Perhaps you still carry some of that guilt. Perhaps you are all too familiar with the way judgmental church people can make you feel inadequate, inferior. It’s a caricature of Christianity that is easy to find, in both conservative and progressive churches. And it colors

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<sup>1</sup> From the preface to the Common English Bible.

how we think about ourselves—sinners—and how we think about God—an angry God in whose hands we tremble.

There is a deep tradition in our stream of Christianity that speaks of the “total depravity” of humanity. This means that we are so thoroughly sinful that there is nothing we can do to earn God’s forgiveness, nothing we can do to merit salvation.

While this tradition takes seriously the reality of sin and its consequences in our lives and in the world, it may be that beginning with total depravity gets us going in the wrong direction. Especially when it is used for manipulation or exclusion, the concept of total depravity can leave a damaging impression on our individual and collective understandings of who we are. Why begin with this negative posture? Why make the absolute sinfulness of human beings the beginning of our Christian story?

In the Bible, God’s story begins with the goodness of creation and the goodness of humanity. Before we are totally depraved, we are created in the image of God and God proclaims that we are *very good*.

Desmond Tutu, who has seen some of the very worst examples of human depravity, insists on believing that humans are fundamentally good. He knows what sin is. He has seen it wreak havoc in the world. But he chooses to begin his understanding of humanity at a different place. And for him, it makes all the difference.

Goodness changes everything. If we are at core selfish, cruel, heartless creatures, we need to fight these inclinations at every turn and often need strong systems of control to prevent us from revealing our true (and quite ugly) selves. But if we

are fundamentally good, we simply need to rediscover this true nature and act accordingly.<sup>2</sup>

So let us begin with the understanding that we are children of God—not because of things we do or choices we make, but simply because we are born as God’s children, created in God’s very image, loved by God unconditionally.

Yet we know that we do not always reflect God’s image. We do not always love as God loves. This is sin. It is an infection that distorts who we really are, affects our relationships, disrupts our communities, threatens our world.

It is to this reality that Jesus proclaims, “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

Friends, this is *good news*, not bad news! This is something to be excited about, not shamed by. This isn’t about guilt. This is about calling us back to who we really are.

Marcus Borg talks about how we have trivialized repentance by making it about introspective guilt, about “feeling really sorry for what you have done or left undone, feeling really bad about the horrible person that you are.” He reminds us that “the biblical meaning of ‘repent’ is not primarily contrition, but resolve.”<sup>3</sup> In the metaphorical imagination of the Hebrew Bible, repentance finds its meaning in the story of the exile, of a people returning home from a time of captivity. In this way, repentance is about returning to God from our captivity to sin, returning to the ways of God, returning to who we really are.

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<sup>2</sup> Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made For Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference* (HarperOne, 2010), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperOne, 2003), 180.

In the Greek New Testament, the word we often translate as “repentance” is *metanoia*. It literally means “a change of mind.” Jesus isn’t trying to guilt us. Jesus isn’t trying to make us feel bad. Jesus is offering us a course correction that will get us back on the way, a change of life that will bring us back to who we really are.

Now, there is a danger in all of this of becoming too focused on ourselves. In our culture, the idolatry of individualism is always a temptation for us.

For example, preparing for Lenten discipline often seems like choosing a New Year’s resolution. It’s actually well timed, because by now most of us have broken our New Year’s resolutions, if we even bothered to make them in the first place. So the things we “give up” for Lent start to sound like the diet we’ve been meaning to start, or the doctor’s advice we’ve been ignoring. Lent becomes yet another way that we try to make ourselves better.

These things may be good, but this approach misses the point. The goal of Lenten discipline is to recognize that we have idolatrous attachments that get in the way of our relationship with God. These idolatries prevent us from loving God with our entire beings and loving our neighbors as ourselves. It doesn’t do us any good to trade one idolatry for another, especially if we eventually just give up or revert back to our old ways of being.

We are called to *metanoia*. In this case, *metanoia* means detaching ourselves from our idolatries and returning to God. It means changing our hearts and lives, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of God and others.

I introduced our scripture reading by suggesting that Ash Wednesday isn’t all about us as individuals. It is important to remember that Jesus’ call is about the kingdom of God. “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

Does this mean that I need to do something—or believe something—now in order to get into heaven when I die? No, it means what it says: “here comes God's kingdom,” right here, right now. God's kingdom is emerging all around us. We just need to get on board. And to do that, we need to change our hearts and lives.

*Metanoia* begins with us, but it is much bigger than us. *Metanoia* is about the emergence of God’s kingdom around us. It is about us participating in that emergence. Ultimately, *metanoia* is about our redemption.

Again, the wisdom of Desmond Tutu brings us back to goodness. “God is not looking for reasons to punish us, as we deserve. God is, rather, looking for ways to redeem us from the prison of our errors.”<sup>4</sup>

Friends, God is on our side. God wants to partner with us in the emergence of something new and beautiful in this world.

“Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

Amen.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 131.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the books already cited, the themes of this sermon are also explored by Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing: Hope-Filled, Open-Armed, Alive-and-Well Faith for the Left Out, Left Behind, and Let Down in Us All* (Jossey-Bass, 2008).