

Communion Meditation for DaySpring

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“Repent and Believe”

Mark 1: 14-20

January 29, 2006

Jesus says that the time is now.

Paul says that the time is short.

... Both are wanting us to wake up.

Because it's time! The time is now.

It's easy not to know that... because life has a way of rocking you to sleep. It's day after day of what it is and the motion of it can deaden us... another day, another do-list... We do what we have to.

But... there is a day here... it's made for us and we're made for it... a different reality... different time and Jesus says it's now.

That was the first thing out of his mouth, **“The time is now.”** Then he preaches his first sermon and man, is it ever short... six words. **“Repent and believe the good news.”** I preached my first sermon when I was in high school and it was pretty short, but six words? It's like he didn't even study.

Six words... that's hardly worth climbing into the pulpit for. I don't think I'd get my paycheck if I tried that. Maybe if I said I with enough passion?

“Repent and believe the good news. Every head bowed, every eye closed... As the choir sings – you come. God is doing business today.” That's it... first sermon in the first gospel written. Matthew says that “repent” was the first public word out of Jesus' mouth.

It's a word that's gotten a bad rap, really. Too many folks who screamed at others to do it and generally that's not something that helps people repent. They just start backing up so you won't spit on them... and repentance isn't about backing up or ducking...

It's about turning and changing...

Changing what you're seeing...

Changing how you're oriented...

It's about changing your mind...

That's literally what metanoia means... a change of the nous... a reorientation of your center. It's not about groveling so much as it is about honesty and perception.

And it's where Jesus starts... the first sermon... the first word. **You have to start here, by repenting.** Apparently it's a pretty big deal then... like we're not going to get the rest of the story if we're not willing to do this. We've got to get this first... hard as it may be,

A real encounter with God is not first primarily comforting... it's only honest and real. (R. Rohr) Jesus doesn't start by saying, “relax;” it's “repent.” Real comes first. First there is what's true and you can't start any place else. We have to get there first.

And Jesus... meek and mild Jesus... says it's even dangerous if we don't get this.

One time he was talking with some folks who wanted to get all philosophical about some terrible things that had happened. A tower had fallen on some innocent bystanders and that lunatic Herod had massacred some worshippers. **“Have you heard about that Jesus... want to get deep with us ‘bout that?”**

And Jesus said something that sounds more like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson than the messiah we all know and love. He said, **“Yep, I’ve heard and unless you repent, you’re going to perish, too.”**

Not a line we read a lot around here, huh? And be careful... he doesn't suggest that God was behind any of it... he just says that unless we repent, unless we reorient our lives, we're perishing, wasting away... we're dying.

And it's really hard to know this going through our Bible Belt motions day after day... especially if you've grown up in a pew like lots of us have... We don't tend to know it when we're dying. It's slow death.

Does the word “repent” even hit you at all? Or is it “been there, done that.” Or is it just a word for “real sinners” that doesn't connect with your reality. Are we sure about that?

According to Jesus, we have to turn around if we're going to be alive... As long as we're looking this way, we're looking at all the wrong stuff and looking to all the wrong things. We're attached to all the wrong things and dying inside because of it.

We have to repent... to change our orientation.

Frederica Matthews-Greene says that repentance is the doorway to the spiritual life. And it's the only one. You can't get on the path from any other place.

You repent and then... you believe. And trust would be a better word. Here's where you once looked, now here. You were attached to this... now something else.

The story that follows this sermon is Mark's way of illustrating the point. You have these four guys... Andrew, Simon, James and John, and their lives are the lake. That's the orientation. That's what defines them.

They fish.

They are fisher-men.

Nets and boats and docks...

That's their world, what wakes them up, and motivates them. It's what prompts their worry... and their happiness. Good catch... good life.

And Jesus comes along and says drop all that and follow me. Trust in me... center your life in me.

That's what he said to them and what he says to us because we have nets in our hands; only they aren't nets, are they? What gives you security? Where do you get your esteem... your well-being? What does your life revolve around?

You have nets... some of them give you a sense of control... Some pleasure... some power.

There's an orientation to your life and to yourself... do you know that yet? It's not always apparent like nets with a fisherman. It's there though... you wake up thinking about it without even meaning to.

What'd you worry about this week?

Who did you fuss with or about?

Where did your daydreams take you?

What did you covet or curse?

And do you even know? It's so hard to know your own attachments and it's equally hard to see the sins those attachments lead us to.

There are nets in your hands and Jesus wants you to drop them, surrender them and follow him instead. **“Repent and believe the gospel.”**

And it is gospel... good news... and do notice that it is good news from the beginning. This is prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is already good news. Jesus comes bearing good news about who God is.

Now that you've turned... there is good news to trust in – and that is that this God who begins by telling you the truth that hurts is in love with you. It's good news; can you trust in it?

Can you believe that God is love? St. John of the Cross says that God refuses to be known except by love. Do you believe that? That there is a compassionate heart and you don't have to get it right first to be in relationship to it.

That's the sermon Jesus came preaching and he told a parable once so we could see it... of a prodigal son and prodigal father. Both extravagant.

And the son has hurt the father... shamed him.

He has sinned and his life's a mess...and he can see that...

So the text says, **“When he came to himself...”**

When he sees himself, he turns homeward and rehearses his speech all the way. **“Father I have sinned against you and heaven...”** he's getting it down... **“Father... I have.... I have... I have sinned.”**

And Jesus' language is so important... pay attention to the words. **“While he was still a long ways off, his father saw him... was filled with compassion... and ran to him.”**

He doesn't wait to hear the speech... checking for remorse and sincerity. The son doesn't even get to finish the speech. The father runs and hugs before there is any rehab, and the older brother out in the field is grumbling about the order of things.

“First we need some groveling, see, and then some consequence and then some rehab... then maybe, maybe a little restoration... as long as he keeps the right attitude.” But that's not the good news Jesus came to preach.

Turn... come to yourself and believe in a God who runs to you in Christ... even when you are still a long way off. And we all are... a long way off.

I wonder if Jesus ever thought about or toyed with a Part II to his story... *The Prodigal Back Home*. I'll bet he did... at least in his mind.

It'd be all about the talks the father and the son had on the porch and the son's growing awareness of how wonderful his father really was... and how stupid he'd been... and the deep sadness he felt when he came to know all the pain he'd caused his dad. Some nights he would just go outside by himself where no one could hear him and weep.

It's a longer story... more of a novel than a parable. In this great story, as the son came to know the father, he also came to know himself... for better and for worse. He could see the things... all the little things that were getting in the way of their relationship.

Like the jealousy he always felt towards his older brother...

And the fantasies he kept having about that far country...

And his tendency to look down on the servants.

He saw all the lies he told himself and all the hidden agendas that drove him.

When he saw these things, he hated that they were there because they weren't things that were in his father's life. And the more he loved his dad... the more hated his own sin... and the more sorrow he felt. It was love that made him know and feel guilt.

It was such a paradox... it was crazy.

The better he was,

the more in need he knew himself to be.

But when he knew that, when he would come to himself again and turn towards his true home... it was as if his dad ran to him again. His father never met him halfway... he only waited for the son to turn and he was instantly there holding him in graceful embrace.

So, in this prodigal household, where love was extravagant... repentance and trusting were ongoing and joy filled the home because of it. And the son learned that the more connected he was to his father the more power he had to change and be like him.

Years later, when the son would think back on that day he'd asked for his "inheritance" he'd shake his head and laugh at how shallow he'd been. Now he knew... he knew how amazing and wonderful his inheritance truly was; and he knew that all the father had, and all the father was, was his.

Repent and believe the gospel... for the first time... for the hundredth time... for the thousandth time. The time is now, the kingdom is at hand... and the God who loves you is longing to embrace you. Amen.