

Repentance

Our gospel reading from Mark this morning only contained seven verses yet it described the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, the sending of Jesus into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for forty days of testing by Satan from which he emerged to find that John the Baptist had been arrested and then the passage concludes with the information that this is when Jesus himself begins proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. And the good news of God's kingdom that he proclaims according to this passage is this: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The good news in Greek literally means gospel which is what we try to proclaim as followers of the one who is recorded as first bringing us this news. But over the many centuries since these words of Jesus were spoken and his ministry recorded it seems that exactly what the good news is or was has varied. In the context of Jesus and the audience to which he spoke, it was even then given more than one meaning. Within the records that we have been given, Jesus placed the good news in the context of "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." For most of those who came to follow Jesus at that time, as they were gathering around him, they understood that as the fulfillment of the long ago promise recorded in their tradition of a ruler for the throne of David, a restoration of the kingdom of Israel. Yet as Jesus' teachings and the training of his disciples continued, it became clear that this was not Jesus' understanding of his mission. Yet he continued to proclaim that the kingdom, the reign of God has come near. We often marvel at how dense the disciples were, how slow to understand they were to grasp what Jesus was trying to explain to them about God's broader and wider plan of redemption. But in many ways I am not sure that we are any wiser. When we listen to the parables of Jesus which describe the reign of God, the way that God desires relationships and interactions to occur...when we listen to these stories of how Jesus asks us to love one another...when we see how Jesus then crosses all the boundaries that exist in his time and culture, to interact with compassion with all...do we not see that this is how the kingdom of God comes near? Do we not understand that Jesus is giving us a demonstration of what God desires for the reign of God to look like...on earth? And do we then remember that Jesus is not only God but also fully man and thus he is demonstrating to us how humankind is to make the reign of God to come near. When we lift the prayer that we have incorporated into our worship services, do we listen to it carefully and understand the meaning of the words that we are praying when we ask for God's reign to come to earth as it is in heaven? Or that we are asking to be forgiven as we extend forgiveness to others? That's the thing about Mark's narrative of the gospel...that good news we have been given...it is like that bullet point outline that gives all the important points that we are to remember with few of the details. It begins with Jesus coming from his hometown of Nazareth to be baptized by John in the river Jordan. Mark does not tell us why Jesus comes to John. We learn that from the narratives given in the other gospel accounts. John the Baptist

was calling all the people to repent of the ways their lives have strayed from obedience to God's ways. Repent! That was John the Baptist's call. When Jesus comes to John and is baptized, Jesus is taking a stand with the rest of humanity...sinful humanity. Mark describes what happens here a little differently than the other two synoptic gospels. Mark says just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This proclamation identifies Jesus as God's son, but in the text the exchange seems private...between the Father and the Son. The Father seems pleased with Jesus' taking a stand with sinful humankind, but then that same Spirit drives him out into the wilderness to further test him. Unlike the other synoptic gospels, the exact tests are not detailed. And the tone is definitely different, not a leading out into the wilderness but a being driven there. Yet after that period Jesus emerged and began his ministry. So Mark clearly, early in his narrative, wants us to see that Jesus is God's Son through his description of the baptism. Mark also wants us to see who Jesus is through his response to temptation. He records that Jesus not only comes to be baptized but withstands temptation in a harsh wilderness. Despite the harshness of the surroundings and the nature of the temptations, Jesus withstood the experience. It is also important to remember that it was the Spirit which placed Jesus in the wilderness. Mark's last bullet point in this passage is what Jesus emerges to proclaim after being tested: He proclaims the good news of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. In announcing the kingdom's arrival, Jesus challenged his listeners to respond in repentance and faith. Following the time of temptation, Jesus lays out the formula for how one comes to such saving and life giving knowledge. The kingdom is here, Jesus proclaims, repent, and follow where the kingdom of God is seeking to lead you by living in the ways of the Lord. Lent is a time of soul-searching in light of the truth of the gospel. It is about knowing whose we are and allowing that knowledge expression in all that we do. As we enter Lent and begin to think about Jesus' call for repentance, do we understand what is asked of us? A common Lenten practice is to "give up" something for forty days. In fact, I have left some of the things I prepared for Ash Wednesday on the table for anyone who wishes to take to have for their use. One of the sheets has suggestions for things that might be "given up" during Lent. Those suggestions focus on attitudes toward others, things which "giving up" might promote better relationships. Repentance is often thought of as "being sorry" or "regretful" about something. And often that may be where repentance begins. Some people also say that the hardest words to utter are the words "I'm sorry." It is difficult to say those words at times, especially when it requires more than a superficial expression of regret. At those times it takes a great deal of humility. We might have to do something called "eating crow" as the saying goes; in order to apologize to someone we've offended or wronged. And as we all know, eating crow is not a tasty dish. But as hard as it is to utter the words, "I'm sorry," I think it is even harder to say the words, "It's my fault." Just apologizing for something still leaves room for the possibility that

you didn't mean any harm, that you innocently offended or wronged the injured party. Saying, "It's my fault" goes way beyond that. It then accepts responsibility for what is wrong. Accepting responsibility for what is wrong is that step that moves the "I'm sorry" from regret to repentance. It calls for a change of heart about what the thoughts and actions were which led to that act, those things which are governing your life which are not loving or compassion toward others. When we enter the season of Lent we talk about it being a time for self-examination, to consider and compare the reality of our lives to the call made upon the by our baptismal vows; to consider what Jesus meant when he proclaimed Repent: the kingdom of God is near. It seems one of the challenges of our discipleship is for us to actually open our hearts to that presence surrounding us with love and life; to trust in the teaching about love and abundant life and the reality of the reign of God being near if we but live the life he taught. Jesus was calling people to open themselves to the presence of God with them, to God moving among them to set things right, to heal and restore those who are wounded and broken, and to bring peace into every life. But the repentance that opens our hearts to that transformation doesn't end with just admitting that it's my fault. That's just the beginning. Repentance means actually doing something to make things right. Whether we like it or not, the coming of God's kingdom of justice and peace and freedom into this world presents us with a "road not taken" kind of choice. If we really want to experience the healing and loving presence of God, then we need to face a hard reality: It means choosing not to continue choosing the selfish ways of this broken world. In another gospel text, Jesus says that this kind of repentance means "denying" ourselves. That's a transformation that doesn't just happen automatically. It's a journey. It's a journey which will take much longer than the forty days of Lent. It is one that we need to make our whole lives. But these forty days are a good time to begin with recognizing our need for repentance, and allowing the transformation to begin which will bring the kingdom Jesus described near. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit