

THE OLD MEETING HOUSE

East Montpelier Center, Vermont

“Swim/Swam/Swum: The challenges of time in the grammar of Repentance”

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Introduction to Mark:

Each year, the set texts for the year revolve around one particular synoptic gospel, with smatterings from John to help underscore certain ideas. This year it's Mark, and that's why I'm taking my time introducing this.

Now, Mark is one of my favorite gospels from a literary perspective – and not just because it is short. I mean *short*. I might have already said this, but a good friend of mine likes to say that Mark writes like he is double-parked somewhere. His narrative, unlike some of the others, seems to be concerned with primarily one thing: giving a biographical narrative, with the invitation to the listener to “come and see.”

Indeed, come and see occurs so many times in this gospel that it is almost its tagline. Mark appears to make no judgments – he simply tells the facts, and lets the reader decide whether or not they trust this Jesus enough to follow him. He took you to the empty grave, and then let you decide. Later on, others thought it might be a good idea to add an appearance story, but the early Mark – he wanted you to trust, to decide for yourself. He was not interested in certitude, or proving. Just inviting.

Mark 1:4-11, 14-20 (NRSV)

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, **he saw the heavens torn apart** and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Some of my favorite memories from my time in Korea revolved around how difficult English is as a language. I have an entire collection of items from Korea with funny slogans. I have a Winnie the Pooh photo album that says, totally randomly, “nose to nose is a nice place to meet”. I happen to think that’s true, if a bit odd. I have a journal that is labeled a “life porpoise journal.” The words for “mini” or small all too often got translated as “baby”, so I have a LOT of pictures of menus advertising “spicy babies” or “get tasty baby here.” “Beer on tap” was translated as “Beer! Alive!”

Now, if any of you are planning on going to Korea any time soon, I would warn you, however, that if you see a sign on a restaurant that says “Live Baby Octopus” – that is *not* a translation mistake.

I don’t collect these because I am making fun of an inability to speak English. Their attempts at English were 1000 times better than my Korean would ever be. Mostly it was because it was a good way of realizing just exactly how much of our life gets lost in translation.

Some of my favorite memories of living in Boston were on the T. Tuesday morning staff meetings, I would get up, pack my bag for the next 10 hours, and walk to the T. When you get into crowded into the car, you would do the look around. That corner was safe – they had the wall street journal out, they’d be getting off at Park street. Over there was the romance novel section – Jodi Picoult, etc. Probably safe, but it was anybody’s guess when they’d get up. Same with the metro readers – the free paper handed out. The worst, however, were the ones without any reading, particularly the ones who made a habit of looking around, as if fishing for a conversation. Danger! Danger!

But me? I had never had to worry. I had the kicker.

It took me all of a week to figure out how to get a seat and to be left totally alone. Early in the morning you didn’t really need to worry about giving your seat up to the more elderly or infirm, so I didn’t feel too bad abusing my newfound knowledge. I added one more item to my morning routine: I would get up and I would very carefully pack my bag, so that when I entered the train, I could pull it out. Thick, black, leather-bound, with the gold-leaf on the edges. It didn’t even have to *say* Bible. Everyone would know what it was. I NEVER had a problem getting a seat all to myself.

⁴*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* ⁵*And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him,*

All of the people in Jerusalem were going out to him.

The whole city in front of me, crowded into a small train car – wrapped into themselves, into their books, their lives, desperately trying to be alone. But I had the secret. If I wanted them to pay attention to me, if I wanted all of the people in Boston to stop, to turn, to stare, politely, like at a car wreck, all I had to do was pull out a leather-bound, black book. I might as well have been a circus act, rolled out for them, right there in the middle of the subway.

Let’s just say they weren’t lining up to be baptized. And certainly not for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Now what if I were to say that my experiences in Korea and Boston are deeply, intimately related? And I don't just mean because pulling out a Bible on the T gets you about the same reaction as if the book spine read: *Get Tasty Baby Here!*

What if my experiences on the T were experiences of things being lost in translation?

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; **repent, and believe** in the good news.”*

Even I have to admit that if I hear this from someone on a street corner, I am going to be wary. More often than not I associate this kind of language with the man who stands outside Fenway with foam-core, poster-board signs saying we are all going to hell for being homosexual, or lazy, or female – or having toasters or something – whatever crazy thing he decides is bad this week.

But here's the thing: that is not what this means. Not at all.

So I'm going to ask you to do something crazy right now. Crazy! If you could take out the bibles in your pew, and turn to these passages, that would be great. We are reading the first chapter of Mark, verses 1-20.

Now, remembering that Mark isn't as interested in making us believe exact things, but in issuing us an invitation to see what this Jesus guy has to offer, let's take a look at this morning's reading again.

If you look at verse 6, you'll notice that Mark is telling us that John was a bit strange, even for his day: “he wore camel hair, and ate locusts and honey.” This is not normal behavior.

Baptisms, however, were not totally outside the norm; there was a long ritual history of purifying baths in the Jewish tradition – much like there is in ours. A linkage of being clean with being holy.

From Mark's narrative, it looks as if Jesus was following John, biding his time, waiting for the Spirit to move him. We see, in Jesus' baptism, that his sense of call is confirmed when the waters of the river Jordan close over him. He sees – note – not the crowd, but Jesus, in that moment, sees and dove, and he hears a voice say to him “beloved.”

But he waits. He waits until the end of John's ministry.

In one of those “the Bible is way cooler than you could think” moments, John is arrested because he makes the mistake of telling the two brother Herods that maybe, just maybe, they shouldn't be canoodling around with the same woman (who happens to be a bit jealous and maybe a tad crazy – [although it couldn't have been easy being her, either]). But, you know, that's a story for another day.

So John is arrested, and Jesus seems to say to himself, “oh alright, I guess the time is now,” and he picks up John's message where he left off.

¹⁴*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; **repent, and believe** in the good news.”*

And here's where the gospel story, the story of the T, the poster-board man outside Fenway, and the stories of Korean menus saying things like "fresh babies" all come together:

We hear "repent and believe," and we think --- what? "You are all sinners?" "You are all damned?" "The world is ending and to avoid some big black pit you should pledge your allegiance to a guy who follows a guy who wore camel hair and ate locusts?" or "You are awful, and loathsome and weak, but hey – have I got good news for you: all it takes is believing that some guy walked the earth and rose from the dead and suddenly all will be well with the world? Except for the fact that it's going to end soon?"

Thousands of years of history, of language changes, of bad theology and bad preaching get in the way.

The verbs in this passage are written in that complicated grammatical tense/aspect called perfect. If you're Peter Gilbert, Alex Brown, or Kim Sturgis, this might mean something to you. For the rest of us, it means essentially this: these verbs are meant to indicate a past action that has continuing effects in the present. So let's look at verse fifteen – can somebody read out their translation? The NRSV says this: "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near."

Does anyone else have something different?

See, it has been argued that it could equally as well be translated: "the time *has been* fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God *is* near. *Keep on* repenting." Or, because of the particularities, it could equally be: "The time *is being* fulfilled, and the kingdom of God *is coming* near."

Now, this might not mean much to you, so let's pull apart the individual words.

The word for kingdom is *basileia*. Kingdom can be a place, or a power or authority.

To come near is *eggizo*. It can imply a person coming near, or a time coming near. This is particularly important with Jesus, in whom we see the power of God. So – with all the linguistic complexities of time (the swim, swam, swum problem, as I said to my Korean students) – in the perfect tense, this verse could mean "The time is fulfilled, God's rule has arrived in Jesus." "The time of God, the rule of God is near us, drawing near us in Jesus."

Which sounds much different to me. Human, divine, half and half, whatever you think about Jesus, it's harder to take issue with the idea that the power of the divine was close when he was around. And the perfect implies that it the power of God *is* close when Jesus *is* around.

Now, maybe you can follow me there. But what about the next part: "repent, and believe!"

This has some institutional baggage, doesn't it?

Repent is literally "*metanoia*" – or "to turn away from". Believe – "*pisteuo*" has a large element of our modern English word "trust" in it. Both are in the present imperative sense – meaning a command in the current tense – like: "eat!" This implies action that starts now and continues into the future. In some cases, this has been translated : "keep on repenting, keep on trusting/believing!"

So it doesn't have to mean "you're all sinners who need to get it straight," as many of us are accustomed to thinking; it can also mean – "hey, keep at it!"

I actually think this scripture, this second half of a single verse, has so much to say to us – particularly at a new year. And it's something I think the church gets wrong. A lot.

Put aside the thought of foam-board man, who interprets scripture to mean that the world is ending, and hear this scripture anew: *the power of God is drawing near us in Jesus, keep at it, keep trusting in the good news of God!*

Now, here's where this gets useful: Think about your new year's resolutions, if you made any. What is going to get you there? Careful planning? The gym membership that will be unused by March? Sheer force of will where before you have failed?

Well, according to Mark, being a good person is like a new year's resolution. There is no expectation that you will be able to be good. None. Grammatically, even, the way this is structured means that you will always be in the process of turning around. It's a constant struggle – and not because you're bad, or evil – quite the opposite; it is simply because the world is complex.

The world is complex. What's good for you and what's good for your neighbor might conflict, and we're going to fail occasionally at figuring it out. Or your kids are arguing in the back seat, and it's going to drive you crazy. You might say things you regret.

But that's okay, because the power of God is coming close to you. That time is coming. That time when the way of the world is different, when the inherently different needs of the lion and the lamb can be reconciled, by knowing their place in this unfolding drama of life.

And until then, trust in the God who is making all things right. Trust in our ancestors, who say *God is in this*. Trust in Martin Luther King, Jr., when he says he has “been to the mountaintop!” Trust in the wandering, perhaps reluctant, preacher, who says God is near, who says that God is a God of forgiveness, of renewal, of life.

A caution, however, there's another way we preachers get it wrong: when we, in any way lead you, or ourselves, to believe that forgiveness or mercy implies that “God doesn't care, so bring on the bacchanalia.”

I know there are some of us in recovery here – and I think you have a lot to teach us. The lessons of addiction recovery are able to take the lessons of these scriptural verses, to strip away 2,000 years of bad theology, and injustice, and make them understandable. “The first step is admitting you have a problem.”

Any doctor, any psychologist can tell you this much: there is no new beginning, no fresh start unless you address the problem. We have to face what it is that is breaking our heart, what it is that is breaking God's heart, and our role in it. We have to turn away. We have to repent, like Jesus tells us.

And then we have to trust that there is something bigger than us out there at work, and seek help.

How differently might our new year's resolutions go if we were able to acknowledge, like those in recovery, that *we can't do it alone*? Because we simply can't. We fail, we have failed. We will fail – swim, swim, swim. We need help.

But what might happen if we trust that this turning around business – these resolutions, this repentance thing – is something *we should* do, and there's something out there that can help us? How different might we feel if the foam-board man or the street corner prophet sounded more like AA? More like the gospel of Mark? More, say, like Jesus?

So the challenge for this week is this: brothers and sisters, how might each day be different if we were to allow that maybe, just maybe, we need to strip away some of our baggage, maybe just maybe hear - truly hear anew these words:

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; **repent, and believe** in the good news.*”

Brothers and sisters, Jesus came to Galilee, Jesus came to Vermont, to East Montpelier, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, to you, A time of love and peace and restoration is approaching, keep turning away from that which you know is not right, that which breaks God’s heart, and trust in the good news – you, YOU are forgiven. You are beloved.