

Epiphany 3B 2018 Sermon

Mark 1:14-20

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

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Francis of Assisi was the son of a prosperous cloth merchant. As a youth, he loved to party with his friends, and had dreams of becoming a knight and gaining glory on the battlefield. All of that would change dramatically.

One day, Francis was riding his horse in the countryside, and he caught sight of a leper walking toward him. His first instinct was to turn back or move off to the side to avoid contact with the leper, for to Francis, as to his contemporaries, lepers were repulsive. But something inside him made Francis get off his horse, embrace the leper, and kiss him. Francis later said, “When I had once become acquainted with [lepers], what had previously nauseated me became a source of physical consolation for me. After that I did not wait long before leaving the world.”¹

What did Francis mean by “leaving the world?” He obviously didn’t take off in a spaceship for another planet; nor did he go off to some abandoned island; nor did he “leave the world” to enter a monastery. What Francis meant by “leaving the world” was that he was no longer ruled by this world’s “systems” – be they economic, social, political, or whatever. He was living now under *God’s* rule, God’s kingdom – not a *geographical* kingdom, but a spiritual kingdom – or perhaps better put, a spiritual “realm,” a realm which co-inhabits the realms of this world, but where it is not power or competition or politics or ego or money that rule, but rather Divine love.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the realm of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Now “repent” is a word which has accumulated a lot of baggage over the years; so let’s find another translation. The word in the original New Testament Greek is *metanoia*, which literally means, “to change one’s mind.” But we aren’t talking here about “I changed my mind; I’ll have the chef salad rather than the hamburger.” We should rather think of it as changing one’s *mindset*, one’s whole orientation toward life. “Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus,” St. Paul writes.² When we are living in the realm of God, our minds function in a different

way, we *see* things in a different way. Rather than approaching life dualistically, judging *everything* and *everyone* we meet as good or bad, right or wrong, liberal or conservative, American or foreigner, Christian or Muslim, one of *us* or one of *them*, we see things instead through the eyes and heart of Christ, where *everyone* is a beloved child of God, everyone has their particular strengths and weaknesses, and everyone is in need of God's grace. Rather than approaching life with an initial mindset of judgment (which is how the realm of **this** world usually operates), the mindset of the realm of God approaches life with an initial *acceptance* of what **is**. "It is what it is." To use a computer metaphor, we might say that to "repent," to change one's mind, is to install in our inmost self a whole new operating system which is based upon the mind of Christ, and which processes data according to the algorithms of Divine Love rather than the algorithms of power, competition, ego, prestige, class, race, or money, which are the algorithms under which much of human society has operated for centuries, if not millennia.

This "change of mindset" which Jesus calls for in our Gospel is comparable in its enormity to the change of mindset which happened when Albert Einstein proposed his theories of relativity, changing the whole realm of physics from Newtonian mechanics to quantum mechanics. After Einstein, physicists could never see the world in the same way again. For the realm of subatomic particles operates on a different operating system, as does the vast realm of cosmic space. Physicists today have an entirely different mind than did physicists just 120 years ago. It is a mind that accepts the evidence that time is not absolute, gravity is a curvature in the space/time continuum, reality may not be 3-dimensional but 11-dimensional, and the universe is suffused with "dark matter" and "dark energy" which nobody has ever seen. Talk about a change of mind!

When Jesus proclaims, "The time is fulfilled, and the realm of God is at hand; change your minds," he is saying that **now** is the time for our mind to be transformed from "the mind of this world" and its systems to "the mind of **God's** realm," or what St. Paul called "the mind of Christ," and some spiritual teachers today call "the contemplative mind." It is a mind, an orientation toward life, which leads with "yes" rather than with "no," with acceptance rather than judgment, with compassion rather than criticism. (We'll look into this more deeply in our Friday night Lenten studies.) This "mind of Christ" was the mind of St. Francis, who lived under the realm of God, having "left" the realm of this world (though still living *in* the world). And this mind of Christ led Francis to kiss lepers and refuse to own anything, so as to not be owned **by** anything. This mind of Christ led Francis to befriend a Muslim sultan in Egypt whilst his fellow Christians were *killing* Muslims in the Crusades. This mind of Christ led Francis to see lepers, the sun, the moon, the animals, and even death itself, as his brothers and sisters.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near," Jesus proclaims; "repent, and believe in the good news." Perhaps a more helpful translation,

equally valid, is, “The time is fulfilled, and the realm of God is at hand; be transformed in your mind, and trust in the good news.”

My friends, many Bible scholars believe that this one sentence from today’s Gospel is the *summary* statement of Jesus’ entire message. For throughout the rest of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus will encounter people living under **different** realms than the realm of God. In the coming chapters of Mark’s Gospel, we will see Jesus’ own disciples, living under the realm of power and prestige, arguing among themselves about which of them is the greatest.³ We will see Jesus encounter Pharisees living under the realm of religious legalism, who, furious that Jesus would perform healings on the Sabbath, will plot to destroy him,⁴ and eventually turn him over to the Romans to be crucified.⁵ We will see Jesus encounter a rich man, who, living under the realm of money, cannot give up his wealth, and becomes the only person in all the Gospels whom Jesus calls to follow him, and refuses that call.⁶ We will see Jesus encounter people living under the realm of prejudice against foreigners and women and children, and he will have compassion on these outcast classes of people. All of this will happen in the coming chapters of Mark’s Gospel because Jesus lives not under the realm of *this* world’s “systems” but under the realm of God; and he reveals this alternative realm, this spiritual realm of Divine love, through his teaching, how he heals, how he lives, and how he dies.

My friends, I don’t need to tell you that much of humanity today lives under the realm of this world’s systems: the realms of power, prestige, politics, prejudice, apathy, money, ego, hardness of heart – I’m sure you can add to the list. That’s why Jesus’ “good news” in today’s Gospel is as relevant to us today as it was to his first listeners – if not *more* so! For the realm of God is here, among us and within us.⁷ Scientists tell us that the universe is suffused with an unseen “dark energy,” which causes our universe to continue to expand rather than contract. What Jesus is telling us is that our universe is *also* permeated with an unseen “light energy,”⁸ the energy of Divine love, the energy of God’s spiritual realm, which pours through Jesus’ hands as he heals and pours through his voice as he teaches – an energy which even raises him from death to life, for it is stronger than death. We need only to *open* ourselves to God’s realm of Divine love and energy, and allow it to transform our minds and our lives. Then, like St. Francis, though we are *in* this world, we will no longer be ruled by its systems of power, money, social status, ego, dualistic thinking, and judgment.

In one of his letters, St. Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah, who asked the question: “Who has ever known the mind of the Lord?” and then Paul immediately answers Isaiah’s question, saying, “...**we** are those who have the mind of Christ.”⁹

“The time is fulfilled, and the realm of God is here; be transformed in your mind, and trust in the good news.”

AMEN

¹ <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/7-key-moments-in-the-life-of-saint-francis/>

² Philippians 2:5

³ Mark 9:34

⁴ Mark 3:1-6

⁵ Mark 15:1

⁶ Mark 10:17-22

⁷ Luke 17:20

⁸ see John 1:5

⁹ 1 Cor. 2:16