

Lenten Series: A Time to Repent
Part I: Repent and Believe the Good News
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
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At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" – Mark 1:9-15, NIV

Recently, the actor Christopher Plummer died. Though he was trained as a Shakespearean actor, he may be best known for playing Captain Van Trapp in the classic movie, *The Sound of Music*. You may also remember that in the movie, Julie Andrews plays Maria, a young woman who is trying to find her calling in life – whether to be a nun or something else. As an interim nanny for the Van Trapp children, she teaches them many things about life. In one scene, she is trying to teach them about musical notes and how to sing. She does this by singing a song that gives some very good advice on many things: "Let's start at the very beginning – a very good place to start."

Today is the first Sunday of Lent – the beginning, and a very good place to start. As we look at this story that "starts at the very beginning" of Mark's gospel with the baptism of Jesus and what comes after that, I want us to ask this: What do the baptism of Jesus, the good news, and repentance have to do with each other? Why does Mark talk about all three of them in these relatively few verses at the beginning of his gospel? And what, if anything, does any of that have to do with us today?

Hundreds of years ago, Martin Luther wrote that when he was going through a particularly difficult time in his spiritual life, he always reminded himself to remember his baptism. It was advice he also gave to others facing difficult times: "Remember your baptism." I wonder if we can remember our baptism or what it meant to us. Maybe we were baptized as a baby and we can't remember anything. Maybe it happened as a child or a teenager or an adult. Maybe it happened not too long ago, and it was one of the most important events of our lives.

One Friday morning back in 1999, it was my day off and I was sitting at the breakfast table reading the paper. I saw on the front page a picture of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta located at 754 Peachtree Street being torn down. Many of you know that I grew up attending that church. I knew that they had sold the property and had already moved to the new location off of I-285, but seeing the picture of the church being torn down grabbed my attention.

I was looking after Mason that day, so I told him that I wanted him to take a ride with me downtown to see something. We got in the car and drove downtown and parked on Fourth Street, right next to the city block where that old, red brick building sat. We got out of the car and began

walking around the chain link construction fence, surveying the demolition process. Only about a fourth of the building had been torn down. We ran into some other former or long-time members of First Baptist, one of them being John Glover, who was still the Minister of Music there. We talked in halting voices about our memories associated with that building.

Mason and I walked around the front of the building along Peachtree Street and then we turned down Fifth Street. There was a wall of the sanctuary that had been knocked down. You could see into the sanctuary through this large gash that had been torn in the side of the building. From the place where we were standing, you could peer in and see the black granite baptismal pool that was up in the front of the sanctuary in the center of the choir loft. And as I looked at it, I remembered my baptism. As a seven-year-old boy, I had been baptized in this pool that was about to be destroyed.

I can remember walking down the aisle on a Sunday evening and telling the minister that I wanted to be a Christian. I can remember meeting the next Sunday evening with the Associate Pastor, Brother Arnold Smith, who talked to me about what I wanted to do. Then he brought me out of his office and told my parents that I seemed to understand it all, as best as I could for a seven-year-old, and that I could be baptized. I remember putting on the white robes that everyone wore who was being baptized and walking down into that pool in front of the whole congregation. I remember Dr. McClain placing a white handkerchief over my face as he lowered me into that water. I can remember my baptism.

When they were tearing down the building that held the place where I was baptized, I asked one of the construction workers if he could bring me a brick from that building. I still have it today. It is just another way to remind me of the important things in my life, one of which is my baptism.

When Martin Luther invites us to remember our baptism, I don't think he means that we have to remember the *act* of baptism. That may be beyond our human capacity. Rather, we need to remember the *fact* that we are baptized. In a sense it is "the very beginning" and it is "a very good place to start." And it has something very important to do with what Jesus does next in Mark's gospel.

When Mark begins his gospel telling the story of the life of Jesus, his "very good place to start" is not with the birth of Christ -- as Matthew and Luke do in their gospels. Mark, commonly regarded as the oldest of the four gospels, begins with Jesus as a grown man and with his encounter with John, who is out baptizing in the wilderness. The beginning of Mark's gospel starts with the baptism of Jesus.

John is out in the wilderness, which is a wild place of testing, temptation, and encounters with angels and demons. John is portrayed as the "new Elijah" — a wild prophet who dresses in strange clothes and eats even stranger foods. He calls people to "repent," which means literally to change one's mind and direction in life by turning from sin and seeking God's forgiveness. And crowds of people from both small towns and the big city of Jerusalem are coming to check out John and to be baptized by him. But as John tells them, there is someone else coming who is more important than John and the baptism He brings is not with water, but with God's Holy Spirit.

Later, Jesus arrives, and John baptizes Jesus. In one of the clearest pictures of the trinity in the Bible, Jesus comes up out of the water while the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove, as the voice of God the Father speaks from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Baptism marks the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus. In a sense, it marks him as chosen by God. By being baptized, Jesus sets an example for those of us who would follow him. Being without sin, he did not need forgiveness -- but in being baptized, Jesus identifies with us and models for us what we are to do in our own lives.

So, Mark's gospel begins with the baptism of Jesus. Then it quickly moves through the temptation in the desert which took place over 40 days -- the same period of time we set aside for the season of Lent. After Mark's abbreviated version of the temptation, he follows by saying that John has been put into prison. And then he says this: “Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” So, what’s the good news – as the saying goes. Bible scholar N.T. Wright in his excellent book, *Simply Good News : Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good*, says that news is something “new” that really *happened*. (In other words, it is not just something like good advice.) And what makes the good news “good” is that it addresses something in life that is broken and needs fixing. My sense is that we all know there is something very basic in life that is broken and needs fixing.

In the movie, *Grand Canyon*, there is a scene in which a lawyer breaks free from a traffic jam and tries to detour around it. But his detour takes him through a part of town that seems more and more threatening. Then his expensive car stalls on a street where teenagers in sneakers are armed with guns. The lawyer calls for a tow truck, but before it comes, five young thugs surround his car and threaten to harm him. However, just in time, the tow truck shows up. The driver, who’s very earnest and genial, starts hooking up the disabled car to his tow truck. The thugs protest – he is interrupting their plans for the guy in the car. The tow truck driver then takes the leader of the group aside and tells him this:

“Man, the world ain’t supposed to work like this. Maybe you don’t know that, but this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be able to do my job without askin’ you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin’ him off. Everything’s supposed to be different than what it is here.” (As told by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. in *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, pg. 7.)

I believe that deep down inside, all of us have a sense that things are not the way they are supposed to be. There is brokenness in our world that rears its ugly face everywhere, and we know in the core of our being it is not supposed to be that way – but it is. I think that awareness begins to open a door to help us understand what we mean by the words “sin” and “repentance.”

The good news of the coming of God’s kingdom that Jesus proclaims here at the very beginning of his ministry is that God’s kingdom is near and has begun breaking into this world. “The kingdom” refers to God’s plan for a world which is different from the sin and brokenness we see now. The good news is that God’s plan was to send Jesus as the Savior of the world. Jesus comes to give his life on a cross in order to break the power of sin and evil so that we can open

ourselves up to God's grace and experience that transformation in our lives. That transformation, in turn, allows us to work with God through the power of the Holy Spirit to begin making this world the way it should be. That is the good news, but it requires that we believe it and that we repent.

So, what does it look like to repent? This Lenten sermon series is called "A Time to Repent." But what exactly does that mean? Now, I know that "repent" is a loaded word in our day and time which may conjure up a number of ideas, but in the Bible, the word simply means "to change one's mind" or way of thinking, in order to head back in the right direction toward God. Yet, we may wonder what this repentance looks like in real life?

A few years back, USA TODAY's cover story was about Lance Armstrong -- the Tour de France winning cyclist and cancer survivor who admitted after many years that he did use all sorts of drugs and banned procedures to help him win his races. This was in spite of the fact that he had denied it for years. The article is about whether the public will forgive Armstrong and if his "coming clean" seemed genuine or not. The writer of the article wandered over into some interesting territory when he started proposing a four-step plan for *repentance* to see if Armstrong had followed it or not. ("Can You Forgive?", *USA TODAY*, January 18-20, 2013, pgs. 1A-2A, by Rick Hampton)

The first step is what he calls "confession" -- which is described as saying "I did it." Some never make it to this step -- simply admitting they did anything wrong. The second step he called "contrition." This would be saying "I'm sorry I did it." He also notes that the best way to undercut such a statement is to make it conditional as in, "I'm sorry if anyone was offended by what I said." The third step, interestingly, is called "conversion." The prevailing sentiment would be, "I will not do it again." And the fourth and final step he calls "atonement." He sums this up as saying, "I will do this because I did that." The author even goes on to cite Zacchaeus in the Bible as an example of one who chooses to pay back what he wrongly collected as a tax collector -- fourfold! It was his way of trying to make things right.

Now we could debate these four steps from theological, Biblical, or practical perspectives -- but overall, I think they are pretty good. And if we want to get back on track with our lives today, especially if we have wronged someone, these four steps may provide some guidance for how to do that. They may also start the process of healing, not only in our lives, but in the lives of others. They help us to see what it means to believe the good news and repent of our part of what is wrong -- not only in our lives between us and God, but between us and others. It is how we begin to live out what we believe and help usher in God's kingdom into our world.

Early in my ministry when I was the youth pastor, we took our kids to the Montreat Youth Conference. I still remember our keynote speaker telling the story of a time he just did not feel that well. He kept on going to work, but he just got worse. (Maybe this is a "guy thing" -- we feel like we are "weak" if we admit we need to go to the doctor. We'll just try to tough it out.) Finally, the speaker's wife said to him, "You need to go to the doctor." So, reluctantly he went. The doctor did what doctors usually do and then the doctor told him, "You are really sick!" The speaker said that it actually made him feel better to get the bad news that he was really sick. Now

that he *knew* he was really sick, he could begin to get better. Pretending he wasn't sick actually kept him from getting well.

When it comes to sin and repentance, pretending that we do not sin doesn't help. It just hides the problem. We do not get better -- we just get worse. Author Frederick Buechner may give us some help on this. In writing about "the gospel" -- which means "good news," Buechner says this: "The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word . . . But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven . . ."

Repentance is really our only hope because it points us to our need for God's amazing grace.

So friends, as Jesus invites us all to do -- *believe the good news and repent*. We each need to look at the sin in our lives we need to be honest about. We need to confess that sin, ask for forgiveness, change the way we think, and then work to never do that again -- all by God's amazing grace. That will not only bring transformation into our individual lives -- it can also allow each one of us to be used by God to bring God's kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.