

Pack Nothing
Mark 1:14-20

This morning's scripture is the opening of Jesus's ministry in the book of Mark. Mark's Gospel varies from the other synoptic gospels—it does not open with a nativity story but instead launches straight into John the Baptist's ministry and Jesus's baptism and subsequent temptation in the wilderness. Just 14 verses in, we are met today with John's arrest, a foreshadowing of the prophetic witness Jesus will bring and his own struggles to come with the Roman Empire. And so it begins—"The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

When we hear the word "repentance," we often think about sin. We did something wrong, and we commit not to doing it again. Repentance, though, is much deeper than simply saying "I'm sorry." When Jesus tells us to repent, he is calling us away from our old way of life and into something new. During our staff meeting this past week, we reflected on repentance and on the importance not just of moving forward, but of first acknowledging wrongdoing as a form of truth-telling. When we pray our prayer of confession each week, we are invited to tell the truth about ourselves and the world in which we live. In the same manner, to engage in real repentance in our own lives, we must tell the truth and name the ways we have fallen short, before God and before one another. By acknowledging our short-fallings, then only are we able to move forward in honesty in our reconciliation process.

Repentance more broadly though, too, is a call *from* a way of life and *to* a deeper life with God. As was the case with the disciples, they had not done anything particularly sinful but instead were ordinary people who were called to leave their old lives behind. Erin Dufault-Hunter writes, "To respond to the gospel and to follow Christ often interrupts an ordinary mode

of existence that is not, in itself, wrong. Rather, as we see with the earliest disciples, sometimes we need to turn from decent jobs or family expectations in order to embrace the good news.”

We see repeated examples in scripture of people being called to leave their normal lives behind. The whole Israelite people were called away from slavery during the Exodus and sent to new life in the promised land. This journey and resettlement was not without its trials, but through the doubts, the fear for their lives and hunger, and the questions about their direction, God was constantly with them. Conversely, Jesus tells the story of the rich man who wants to know how to gain eternal life. When he is told to give up his possessions and follow Jesus though, the man walks away sadly.

The first disciples were called away from their families and jobs to join in ministry with Jesus. These were ordinary, working-class people—they were hard working, skilled laborers who were perhaps a bit messy and smelly from fishing all day. They weren’t the people who would have been traditionally trained as religious leaders. Instead, Jesus calls people who were just like us to be his friends and co-conspirators in the beginnings of his ministry.

Both understandings of repentance are important for us to understand as we seek to follow God in our own lives. We must turn away from our ways of harming one another, admitting the truth about our failings and striving to be in more loving community together. But we also must be willing to let go of all that holds us back from God, not just that which we might consider “bad” or “unholy.” In a world that is hurting, we must be willing to name our societal failings in addition to our individual ones.

In thinking back to that repentance and call of the Israelites, Rick Morley reflects, “‘Repent’ is part of the poetry of exile, something that the Israelites knew a lot about. Repenting, when in exile, meant going home. I think if we in the church talked more about ‘going home’

than ‘feeling bad,’ the church would be a healthier and holier place. And, Jesus telling us that we can *go home*, and that God will welcome us back, and throw [God’s] arms around us is such good news.”

We are called to find a new home and a new way of being in God. Perhaps this means leaving a job or the life we love behind; or perhaps it means challenging ourselves to look for new ways of being in community in the lives we currently lead. During this past year, we have unintentionally gone through a communal exile. We have given up a great deal, some things by choice and others not. We hear often that we can’t wait to get back to “normal,” but I think we have started to realize as a society that the old “normal” might not have been good and loving and worthy for everyone. We have an opportunity now to reconsider what we want for our futures- how we will reshape ourselves into a *new* normal that is wide enough for all to feel at home and safe. We are called to repentance in this time, and the work is already being done. We have been called through conversations about race, gender, and sexuality to acknowledge the ways that we hurt one another and isolate our neighbors, often without even realizing it. If we are to bring about the kingdom of God here on earth, let us open ourselves to how God is at work reshaping our future even in the midst of a global pandemic.

What has changed for you and your family this past year? What have you left behind that has made space for you to feel closer to God? And what are you missing now that you are ready to “return home” to when we are released from this exile? As we move forward together, let us act as the disciples: drawing near to Christ, looking for God in the ordinary, and trusting that there is a future ahead of us if we are willing to embrace it.

Before I started Divinity School, I spent a year as a Young Adult Volunteer, or YAV, which is a service year through the PC(USA). During the year, volunteers are asked to live

simply in intentional community with the other YAVS, serving at local nonprofits and congregations while learning about living with little means. While reflecting on this scripture passage, I was reminded of a poem that was shared with us during our YAV orientation. This poem inspired me as I reflected on the calling of the disciples and our own calls, remembering all that we are called to leave behind as we seek to follow Christ. The full poem is on our website in the sermon text, if you'd like to read it, but I wanted to share an excerpt with you now. This is from "Passover Remembered," by Alla Renée Bozarth.

Pack Nothing.

Bring only your determination to serve
and your willingness to be free.
Don't wait for the bread to rise.
Take nourishment for the journey,
but eat standing, be ready
to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave
your old ways behind—
fear, silence, submission.

Only surrender to the need
of the time—to love
justice and walk humbly
with your God.

Do not take time to explain to the neighbors.
Tell only a few trusted friends and family members.

Then begin quickly,
before you have time to sink back
into the old slavery.

Set out in the dark.
I will send fire to warm and encourage you.
I will be with you in the fire
and I will be with you in the cloud.

You will learn to eat new food
and find refuge in new places.
I will give you dreams in the desert

to guide you safely home to that place
you have not yet seen.

The stories you tell one another around your fires
in the dark will make you strong and wise.

Outsiders will attack you,
and some who follow you,
and at times you will weary
and turn on each other
from fear and fatigue and
blind forgetfulness.

You have been preparing for this for hundreds of years.
I am sending you into the wilderness to make a way
and to learn my ways more deeply.

Pass on the whole story.
I spared you all
by calling you forth
from your chains.

Do not go back.
I am with you now
and I am waiting for you.

The kingdom of God has come near, and we are called to be part of its creation. Roger Gench writes, “What this means is that we can no longer make our peace with the world as it is. We can no longer numb ourselves to violence and suffering. Disciples of Jesus are called to live as if the realm of God is a reality taking shape, even now, in our midst — indeed, disciples are empowered to participate in making the way of God present in every age, including our own, until the day it comes in all its fullness.” God’s kingdom is already and not yet in its fullness here on earth, brought about by Christ’s witness and resurrection and continued through prophets and disciples of every time and place who seek to follow God’s word.

For Jesus, repentance and the good news of the Gospel were tied together in order to bring about the kingdom of God. We are called to tell the truth about ourselves and about our

world, not from a place of shame but from the freedom that comes through confession. When we acknowledge human need for one another and for Christ, we are freed to move forward. Let us let go of our old ways and move with grace and compassion for ourselves and for others, creating a new life ahead as the called and beloved people of God. May we see and be the light in the coming days, co-laborers in Christ's work to bring justice and mercy to this world. In this messy, difficult, and beautiful work, remember that you are loved and called to turn always towards God. Open your hands and let go of whatever you are gripping so tightly, and make space for something new. Amen.

“Passover Remembered”
Alla Renée Bozarth

Pack Nothing.
Bring only your determination to serve
and your willingness to be free.
Don't wait for the bread to rise.
Take nourishment for the journey,
but eat standing, be ready
to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave
your old ways behind—
fear, silence, submission.

Only surrender to the need
of the time—to love
justice and walk humbly
with your God.

Do not take time to explain to the neighbors.
Tell only a few trusted friends and family members.

Then begin quickly,
before you have time to sink back
into the old slavery.

Set out in the dark.
I will send fire to warm and encourage you.
I will be with you in the fire
and I will be with you in the cloud.

You will learn to eat new food
and find refuge in new places.
I will give you dreams in the desert
to guide you safely home to that place
you have not yet seen.

The stories you tell one another around your fires
in the dark will make you strong and wise.

Outsiders will attack you,
and some who follow you,
and at times you will weary
and turn on each other
from fear and fatigue and

blind forgetfulness.

You have been preparing for this for hundreds of years.
I am sending you into the wilderness to make a way
and to learn my ways more deeply.

Those who fight you will teach you.
Those who fear you will strengthen you.
Those who follow you may forget you.
Only be faithful. This alone matters.

Some of you will die in the desert,
for the way is longer than anyone imagined.
Some of you will give birth.

Some will join other tribes along the way,
and some will simply stop and create
new families in a welcoming oasis.

Some of you will be so changed
by weathers and wanderings
that even your closest friends
will have to learn your features
as though for the first time.
Some of you will not change at all.

Some will be abandoned
by your dearest loves
and misunderstood by those
who have known you since birth
and feel abandoned by you.

Some will find new friendship
in unlikely faces, and old friends
as faithful and true as the pillar of God's flame.

Wear protection.
Your flesh will be torn
as you make a path
with your bodies
through sharp tangles.
Wear protection.

Others who follow may deride
or forget the fools who first bled
where thorns once were, carrying them

away in their own flesh.

Such urgency as you now bear
may embarrass your children
who will know little of these times.

Sing songs as you go,
and hold close together.
You may at times grow
confused and lose your way.

Continue to call each other
by the names I've given you,
to help remember who you are.
You will get where you are going
by remembering who you are.

Touch each other
and keep telling the stories
of old bondage and of how
I delivered you.

Tell you children lest they forget
and fall into danger—remind them
even they were not born in freedom
but under a bondage they no longer
remember, which is still with them, if unseen.

Or they were born in the open desert
where no signposts are.

Make maps as you go,
remembering the way back
from before you were born.

So long ago you fell
into slavery, slipped
into it unawares,
out of hunger and need.

You left your famished country
for freedom and food in a new land,
but you fell unconscious and passive,
and slavery overtook you as you fell
asleep in the ease of your life.

You no longer told stories of home
to remember who you were.

Do not let your children sleep
through the journey's hardship.
Keep them awake and walking
on their own feet so that you both
remain strong and on course.

So you will be only
the first of many waves
of deliverance on these
desert seas.

It is the first of many
beginnings— your Paschaltide.
Remain true to this mystery.

Pass on the whole story.
I spared you all
by calling you forth
from your chains.

Do not go back.
I am with you now
and I am waiting for you.