

Summary:

“The Way Back,” the first in our series for Lent, “The Way of Jesus,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of The Master United Methodist, Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020.

Detail:

2-26-20 Ash Wednesday Sermon “The Way Back”

My wife, Lynn, and I like to travel - sometimes to new places we’ve never been and other times to old, familiar, trustworthy places where we know our way around, have some favorite restaurants, and where, when we go there, we have some tried and true routines.

One such familiar place is Pompano Beach, Florida.

We were just there in January for maybe the 5th time. It’s a place where we don’t need GPS to get to most of the places we want to go because we know the way, where we know which restaurants we like - even recognize some of the servers who have been there for years - and where we don’t have to relearn things in order to have a relaxing time.

We go there every year or two.

And we’ve learned along the way that this trip is more enjoyable if we can minimize the airport hassles.

One way we do that is by trying to book the one non-stop flight each way that Southwest Airlines offers. Southwest’s Saturday morning non-stop to Ft. Lauderdale departs Columbus at 6am.

Now, I am a lot of things, but a morning person is not one of them. But for this vacation I make an exception. To make a 6am departure means being at the airport by 4:30, which means getting up at 3am.

To me, 3 am is not morning, it's the middle of the night. Getting up at 3am is not an easy thing to do, especially when the night before we've been doing last minute packing, checking, verifying that we've stopped the mail and the paper, that anything that might spoil in the fridge before we return is disposed of, and all of that pre-travel "stuff."

The night before leaving is usually a late evening and when we go to bed, I won't speak for Lynn here, but I'm a little amped up so it sometimes takes me a little while to get to sleep. And when I finally do nod off it feels like I've only been asleep for a few minutes before that 3AM alarm goes off like a fire alarm right next to the bed.

I jump up, scared awake - a sensation I hate, by the way - my heart races like I've just run a 100-yard dash, and I wonder if, before we leave for the airport, we might need to change the sheets on the bed. Do you feel me here?

THAT, my friends, THAT is the effect that the beginning of Mark's Gospel invites; that alarm that goes off and scares you awake, a plunge into icy cold water, or sticking your moist finger into a very inviting light socket. Mark seeks to shock his readers into a new reality.

"This is the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son," he writes.

"God's Son," he proclaims in the first sentence.

There's no slow and methodical building of a case, there's no "hitting the snooze," if you will, and coming back to it later, Mark just puts it out there and lets the chips fall where they may. In Mark there are no birth stories, no angels or shepherds receiving tidings of good news, no manger or stable or magi like we read in Matthew and Luke. There's no poetic theological pronouncement like John's "In the Beginning was the Word." Nothing. Like. That. Mark wastes neither energy nor breath on superfluous words.

In fact, I always think of Mark as the "Dragnet Gospel," because he gives "Just the facts, M'am, just the facts."

Mark gets straight to the point, and the point he is making is that "Jesus is the Son of God, here's how I know, and here's what that means." He quotes the Prophet Isaiah to support his claim - a messenger has been sent to "prepare the way" for the Son of God - and then bang, (**bang hand on pulpit**) the gospel account turns to John the Baptist, the messenger of record.

And what was John the Baptist doing?

Well, baptizing of course, but calling people to change their hearts and lives, and calling on God to forgive their sins. Some translations use the word "repent" here, but we often minimize our idea of repentance as simply meaning confessing our sins, asking for forgiveness, saying "I'm sorry."

But that's only a small part of what is meant by repent. The word translated "repent" in Greek, *metanoia*, means to change one's thinking, to go in a new direction.

So it's about much more than just saying "I'm sorry" to God or anyone else, it's about making real change in our lives, in our thinking, and in our actions.

So Mark chapter 1 throws that out there for us; Jesus is the Son of God and if you want anything to do with him you're going to have change how you do things, how you think about things, because Jesus' way is not your way. Mark is blunt. He's direct. Mark's gospel is the earliest of the Gospels to be written and is the shortest of the four. We know that Matthew and Luke used Mark's Gospel as one of their written sources when they wrote their accounts because they copy and paste large parts of it word for word. Theologian and scholar Suzanne Watts Henderson writes of Mark's Gospel.

"...some view Mark as an example of Greco-Roman biography. Yet it is more than that. This Gospel also reads like Jewish religious history (e.g. 1-2 Kings) because it reflects strong religious commitments.

It includes the sort of prophecy we find in Jewish writings and reflects a belief that the end of the world is coming soon. Perhaps most important, Mark locates stories about Jesus within the larger story of God's coming kingdom. This Gospel represents a historical narrative that calls for a faithful response to the good news about God's kingdom."

"A faithful response," she writes. John's call for the people to "change their hearts and minds" is followed by Jesus' call - on the other side of his baptism and wilderness experience - to do the same thing, "to change your hearts and lives, and trust in this good news."

“A faithful response.” And with that Jesus immediately goes to work: he calls disciples, casts out demons, heals Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, heals a man with skin disease and many others “who were sick or demon-possessed.”

By the time we get to chapter 9 of the gospel and our second reading, Jesus has done battle with the Pharisees over healing on the Sabbath, about announcing the forgiveness of sins, about fasting and other points of law, about eating with sinners, all while at the same time having begun teaching his disciples, walked on water, performed miracle feedings of 5,000 people and then of another 4,000, and just for grins and giggles, also calmed a storm. The way of Jesus has been a lot of things for the disciples, but never boring.

And in chapter 9 Jesus springs the news on them as they were walking along - rather matter-of-factly it seems - that when they get to Jerusalem he will likely be killed by the religious powers that be, but that after three days, God would raise him from the dead.

And Mark, in what sounds like a Dagnet Joe Friday deadpan says, “But they didn’t understand this talk and were afraid to ask him.”

“Afraid to ask him.” So what do they talk about instead? Which of THEM is the greatest.

Mark makes no bones throughout his Gospel about letting his reader know that the disciples just don’t get it sometimes, that they’re not always the best and the brightest. This is just another example.

They’ve seen it all but a lot of it just doesn’t compute for them.

They hear Jesus say the words, he's told them this before, they've seen what he has done and can do, but sometimes it just doesn't register.

They have this traditional understanding of what the "Messiah" would be like, a king or a general who would rise up and overthrow their oppressors being the most common, but being handed over and killed in Jerusalem by the religious authorities is not part of that anticipated scenario. So Jesus tries again, telling them what he's told them before, this time in a new way.

But it doesn't sink in with them.

So, in a stick-their-fingers-in-their-ears-and-sing "La-la-la-la-la," kind of way, they turn the conversation to themselves.

I like what N.T. Wright says about this passage,

"At this stage we can not only sympathize with the disciples; we must ask ourselves whether we do the same thing. When God is trying to say something to us, how good are we at listening?

Is there something in scripture, or something we've heard in church, or something we sense going on around us, through which God is speaking to us - and if so, are we open to it? Are we prepared to having our earlier ways of understanding things taken apart so that a new way of understanding can open up instead?"

And as Wright goes on to point out, "A sign that the answer may still be 'no,' is if, like the disciples...we are still concerned about our own status and what's in it for us." The way of Jesus is not like the ways of the world.

“Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all,” Jesus tells them.

The other Gospel writers spend a little more time unpacking these words, but Mark just leaves them on the table, for the Twelve and for us.

“The way we have always done it,” - what I refer to as the Last Seven Words of a Dying Church - is NOT the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is counter cultural, it’s revolutionary, it’s iconoclastic, it takes no prisoners.

It’s a turning of our hearts, our minds, and our lives in a new direction. A new direction that is actually an old direction.

“Return to me with all your heart,” writes the Prophet Joel in our third reading, speaking on behalf of God.

With ALL your heart, not just some of it, not in a half-hearted way.

The way of Jesus is the way back to God, a return to the God who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” The way of Jesus is an embracing of the Creator God who created and embraces us, the God who in the Creation narrative scooped the dust of the earth into the divine hand - dust that God created - formed that divine dirt into a human, into us, and breathed into it, and into us, the breath of life, the Spirit of God.

Lent reminds us that it is from this dust that we came and that in the end it is to this dust that we will return, all within the embrace of the all-encompassing love of God. Lent calls us to go back to the original story, to return to our roots, as John put it, "In the Beginning..."

The evangelist Mark, from "the beginning," brings us, sometimes at breakneck speed, through the pages of this gospel, this good news, with the intention and goal of our seeing Jesus Christ as the one who is the crucified and risen Lord. The way of Jesus is a wandering way and a freeing way; it is a way back - back to God's original intention for humanity and all of creation when God proclaimed all of it "good and very good."

This is not only the beginning of the good news, the gospel, but in Jesus' death and resurrection we have the fulfillment of all the aeons of time in Jesus the Christ.

So may tonight mark for us, in the sign of an ashen cross on our foreheads, the beginning of the good news of our way back to truly following the way Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Amen.