

“Metanoia” // *Christ Among Us: Repent and Believe*
Lent 2024, part 1 // Wildwood Mennonite Church
Feb 18, 2004 // Joe Heikman

*“The time has come,” Jesus said.
“The kingdom of God has come near.
Repent and believe the good news!”*

Mark 1:15 (New International Version)

What does it mean to repent?

I expect that word carries some baggage for some of us. For me, it takes me back to church revival meetings, hour long sermons on 95-degree summer nights, in *The Tabernacle* at Roxbury Holiness Camp.

Repent! Come forward right now to confess your sins at the altar, while the music softly plays, and all the other teenagers gossip about which particular sins you may be repenting of! 😊

The classic definition of repentance in my Evangelical upbringing was all about sin--admitting your sin, asking Jesus for forgiveness, and then turning and going the other direction, living a life of holiness. Until the next sin popped up and you needed to *repent* again.

So. Repentance in that sense requires confession. Let's do it.

One of the greatest sins of my life was... in the fifth grade. Plagiarism. That's right, kids, before there was AI to do our homework, we had to cheat the old fashioned way and steal it from others directly. 😊

Actually, it wasn't that bad. The assignment was to write an original story, of some particular length, on whatever we wanted to write about. I liked writing, and I was a pretty creative kid, but for whatever reason I had a bad case of writer's block.

The only story I could think of was one that I'd heard on the children's story hour on our local Christian radio a few weeks before. It was a cool story, about a little dog who took on a mountain lion to protect her owner. Exciting stuff, and the bravery and loyalty spoke to my self-conscious middle school heart. I wanted to write a story like that!

But unfortunately, my brain got stuck there and I couldn't think of any other plot lines. With the deadline approaching, I decided to just write that story in my own words. I changed the names and some details, even convinced myself that I didn't remember the story exactly so I was probably imagining most of it--that's basically the same as writing it... right?

And I figured there's no way Miss Strite was listening to Saturday morning children's programming on that exact day...

But apparently she was, or maybe that story was more widely known than I expected. Anyway, she knew something was up, and she called me to her desk to talk about it.

I denied everything! I claimed I hadn't heard the story on the radio, so maybe the whole thing was a big coincidence. Miss Strite had no proof, other than my beet red face.

So she went public with her accusation. She read my story to the class, and asked if anyone had heard this story before. Almost everyone raised their hands--oh yeah, that's the story from *Your Story Hour on WCRH* last week.

I was totally ashamed, cheeks burning, head down, the whole bit. So much shame.

But I still denied it all. *Nope, I'd never do anything like that... I did not hear this story before...that's really weird...who can say where ideas come from?*

Nobody bought it, obviously. But rather than punishment, Miss Strite gave me a second chance to write a new story. She suggested that I could take those same characters and come up with a new adventure for them.

I jumped at the chance for redemption, and completed the assignment like I should have done in the first place. To my amazement, Miss Strite also read my new story to the class when it was finished, and I got some good compliments on it from my classmates.

I felt sooo much better. And, lesson learned--I've never plagiarized a single thing in my life again. I even feel guilty about using my own stories more than once in my preaching. 😊

Is that repentance? I never did admit to my sin, other than to you all right now. I sure did feel badly about it, and I did my best to make it right.

I was forgiven, by the class and by Miss Strite, even though I never asked for it. And I'm sure God forgave me as well, though I don't specifically recall asking for that either. I'm sure it was somewhere in the list of sins in my heart I repented of during one of those altar call situations...

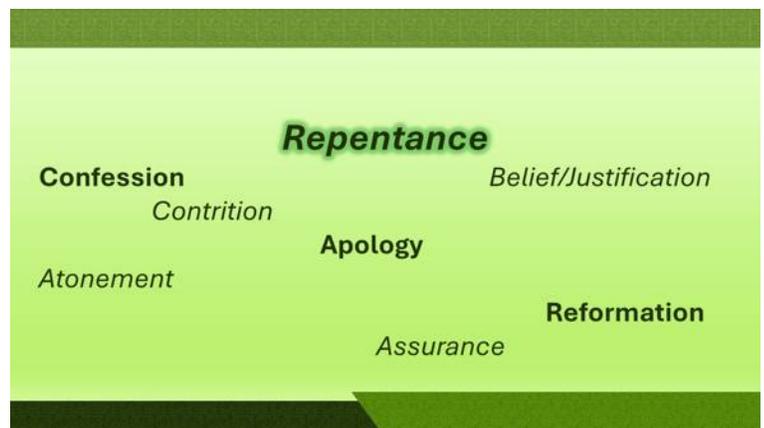
That is one kind of repentance. An individual becoming aware of their sin, asking for forgiveness, and trying to make a change, to live differently moving forward.

Some would add *contrition* to the list, that you need to *feel sorry* for your sin, the harm that you've done to others and to God.

Others would add some form of right *belief*, believing in Jesus' act of grace on the Cross as the *means* to our forgiveness

And maybe we should put an act of *restitution* in there as well, an attempt to make things right.

And Catholics would rightly point out that when we speak our confessions in community, we benefit from that person-to-person connection by hearing words of *assurance*.



Those are some fancy words, but you get the idea. To repent is to recognize what you've done wrong, try to make it right, and do better next time.

If that's what you need this morning, well, I say, "go for it." There's plenty of room for that in Lent. We prayed a Prayer of Confession and Assurance already today, and those will be scattered throughout our worship in this season, a reminder of our shared limitations and our collective need for change.

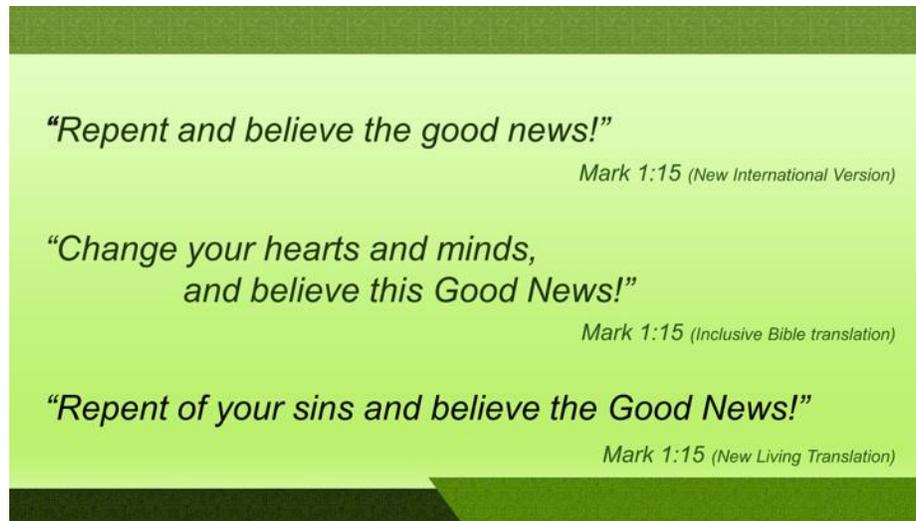
If you're feeling convicted about something and want to talk, I'd be glad to listen and to respond with the assurance of God's forgiveness and unconditional love.

And I promise I won't drag anyone in front of the class for a public apology! Repentance from Sin is part of the journey, and there is plenty that could be said in that direction.

HOWEVER, I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about here at the start of the Gospel of Mark. Not exactly.

"The time has come," Jesus said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

The meaning of this phrase, "repent and believe," is rather ambiguous, perhaps intentionally.



You'll notice that Jesus doesn't mention sin in this verse. This Inclusive Bible translation that we read earlier doesn't even use the word "repent", it says "change your hearts and minds."

Most English translations do use "repent," though, and many even insert the word "sin" into the verse, even though the word for sin is not there in the original Greek.

(If you'll indulge me, I need to venture off into the weeds of Biblical analysis here for a few minutes...)

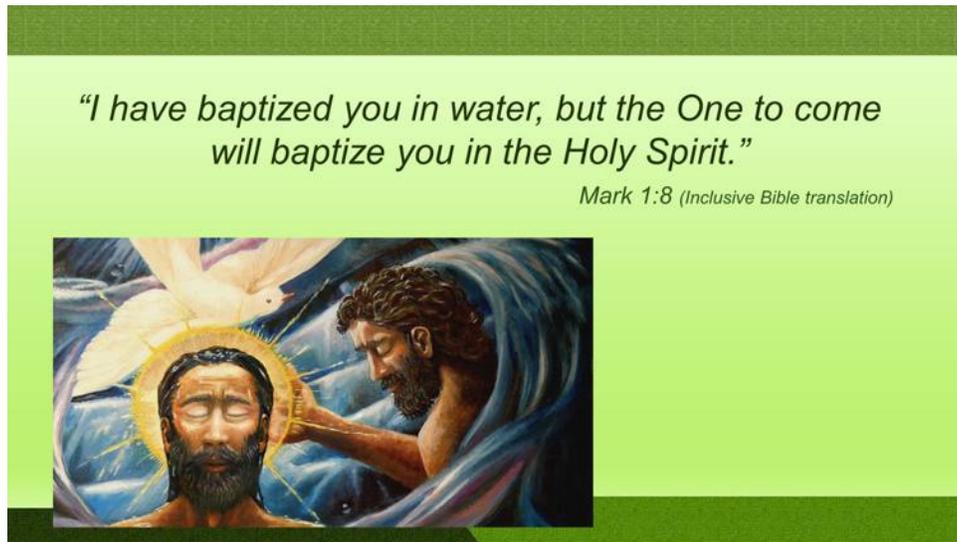
The gospel of Mark definitely opens with the repentance from sin in mind.

Mark begins with John the Baptist, "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John is reimagining, out in the desert, a Jewish ritual of purification--a person confesses their sin and goes into the water unclean, and through the water they receive forgiveness and emerge *clean* and able to participate in the community of worship.



That's the classic Evangelical repentance that I was describing, that our Anabaptist ancestors would have claimed as well. [Recognize the wrong, ask for forgiveness, move ahead on a different path]. That's definitely present in the baptism of John in verse 4, and that may well be what Jesus is implying here in verse 15.

However, in between verse 4 and verse 15 comes verse 8



John the Baptist, and the writer of Mark, go out of their way to emphasize that Jesus' baptism is *different* from John's baptism. John offered repentance, change, through a ritual with water. But Jesus will offer change through the Spirit.

It's unclear what that means, exactly. But if Jesus is offering the same kind of baptism, the same kind of repentance, as John, then why emphasize the difference?

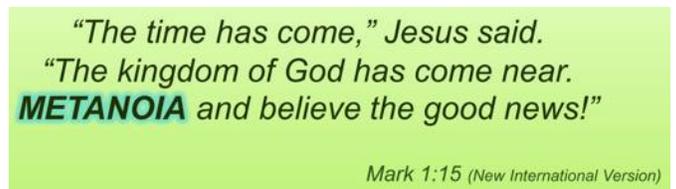
To me, that suggests that Jesus is talking about a different kind of repentance.

And instead of "repent of your sins," when Jesus speaks for himself, he doesn't talk about sin directly, but uses the word *metanoia* on its own.

Metá, the word for change, as in meta-morphosis--to change form.

And noeó (noy-EH'-o), "to perceive, to think"

Metanoia, change your mind. Change your understanding.



The [Greek Orthodox Church teaches](#) that “The Greek term *metanoia* denotes a change of mind, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of outlook, of humanity’s vision of the world and of ourselves, and a new way of loving others and God.”

Wow.

In the Heikman translation, then, Mark 1:15 reads something like:

*“The time is now! The Realm of God is right here!
And that changes everything--if you’re ready to
embrace that goodness and reorient your view
of the whole world.”*

Mark 1:15 (Heikman Perspective Added translation)

If “Christ is Among Us” as our Lent worship materials put it, the “Kingdom of God is at hand,” in the old King James version, if we could truly see that God is with us, now, well yeah. That sure should be good news.

However, the first Century Jews, of which Jesus was one, did not generally see the Kingdom of God as a present reality. How could they?

They were subjects of the Empire of Rome--much to the chagrin of most Jews. They had a nominal King, Herod, and some level of autonomy to live their own culture and practice their own faith. As long as they paid their taxes, participated in the Greco-Roman economy, and didn’t cause trouble.

But they were still subjects, *allowed* these graces at the mercy of the Empire, living in a shadow kingdom.



The ancient Jews had several different ways of explaining this. The strongest explanation was that they were still a people in Exile. You remember the Exile, from the Hebrew Bible?

A very short history of the Old Testament. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, then Moses led them through the Red Sea, through 40 years in the wilderness, and ultimately to the homeland of their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah. "The Promised Land," the "Kingdom of God"

For 5 or 8 centuries, the Hebrews dominated their region through various iterations of tribes, rulers and kingdoms. Ultimately, though, the twin nations of Israel and Judah were conquered by emerging empires, and a large portion of the survivors, the Jews, were carried off into Exile in the land of Babylon.

After about 70 years, some of the Exiles returned to Judea and rebuilt in a smaller way the city and Temple of Jerusalem. Some Jews treated that return as the end of Exile, and with various forms of government they maintained a presence and identity in Judea and Galilee for 500 years through the time of Jesus.

For many others, though, the Exile never really ended. Many Jews remained scattered around the Mediterranean region and became more Greek than Jewish, culturally.

From a religious perspective, many Jews believed they had lost the Promised Land. Their ancestors had turned away from God, as detailed in the writings of the Prophets, and so God had withdrawn the Holy Presence from the Temple and punished God's People with Exile. Though they had rebuilt the Temple, the *Shekinah* presence of God had never returned to the Holy of Holies.

The Kingdom of God, then, was an idea for the future. Someday, their punishment would be over, the Exile would end, and the Kingdom of God would come. That was the dream, the return of the political, economic, cultural, spiritual Kingdom of God.



To *those* people, Jesus said, “The time has come! The Kingdom of God is here and now! Change your understanding, and embrace this good news!”

To make this invitation clear, Jesus did some performance art, or maybe the writer of Mark retold events with a dramatic flair. Mark chapter 1 is a retelling of that history of Israel that I just went through.

We have a Moses figure, the wild prophet in the wilderness. We have the journey through the waters of the Red Sea, as Jesus goes *through the waters* of the Jordan. We have the journey in the wilderness, 40 symbolic days representing 40 symbolic years.

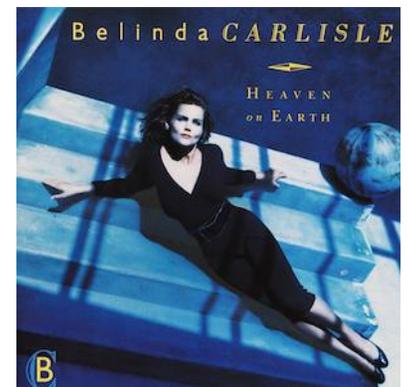


And then, at the climax of the chapter, the Moses figure gives way to a new leader, and *Yeshua* arrives in the homeland and declares: “The Time is Now! The Kingdom of God is right here! We are in the Promised Land, y’all!”

That’s where we’re at in this familiar story, Jesus says. *You thought you were waiting for God to show up, to bring the Kingdom someday. But no, God is already here. It’s right in front of you, it’s yours for the taking.*

To bring that into most of our lifetimes, as [80’s pop prophet Belinda Carlisle put it](#),

*Ooh, baby, do you know what that's worth?
Ooh, Heaven is a place on Earth
They say in Heaven, love comes first
We'll make Heaven a place on Earth
~ brought to you by 96.3, Cruuuz FM*



Seriously, that’s the “good news” Jesus is talking about in Mark chapter 1.

Heaven is right here, right now. If we *metanoia*, change minds, our hearts, change how we see and live in the world.

Now, in the “real world,” that good news changed next to nothing for those who chose to trust and follow Jesus.

Rome still dominated. Taxes were still due. The Temple religion carried on. The common people still worked, and ate and drank, and bled and died... Life went on.

But, for those who trusted Jesus, who allowed the *metanoia* Spirit to change their minds and hearts, the whole world shifted.

You see, when you believe you're living in Exile, you see everything in terms of separation.

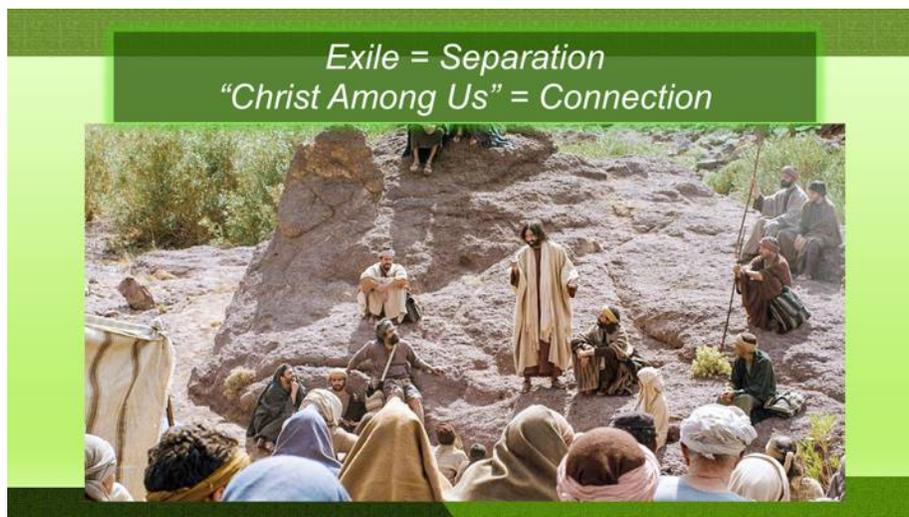
We are far from home. And we're trying to get back to where we came from, back to the good old days, back to when we had power and status and security. We're trying to get home, back to our people.

*And in the meantime, we are strangers in a strange land. We're not like the locals, we're trying to preserve **our** ways and keep **our** children from becoming too much like **them**.*

When you see yourself in Exile, it's all about these divisions. The longing for what was and what might someday be, the separation between "us" and "the world."

And to that, Jesus says, *I am here, now. God is here, now.*

If you can believe that, then the divisions fade into the background, just a bit.



You're not trying to get somewhere else, because you already are where God is.

You're not trying to get back to the idealized past, and you don't spend a ton of time dreaming about an idealized future, because *this moment* is already bursting with God's presence.

You're not so worried about insiders and outsiders, us vs them, because if you truly trust that God is among us, then you're not threatened by whatever *they* are up to. If God is among us, then then we can "[draw the circle wide, draw it wider still.](#)"

You're not worried about sacred vs secular, because, in the words of Richard Rohr, "we are living in a [Christ-soaked world.](#)"

If the Kingdom is Now, if Christ is Among Us, then our connections far exceed our divisions. The base level is not separation, but union. And THAT, is what the Realm of God has always been about: [Hear, O People, Our God the Creator, Our God is One.](#)

Now, I know, there is plenty of division in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, about insiders and outsiders, about how to get into the kingdom, about when the Kingdom will arrive in fullness, because clearly all is not *right* in the world. We're not there yet.

That's true. That longing for what was and what might be is real. The divisions between me and you, us and them, are hard to shake.

The Biblical writers were human, caught up in the reality that we see and live--where divisions are messy and complicated and seemingly insurmountable. AND, the Biblical writers also called us beyond, to an understanding of a deeper reality, where "all differences, divides and distinctions exist within larger unities," all parts exist within wholes."

"Which reality are you going to ground yourself in?" Jesus is asking. Are you going to trust only what is visible? OR, are you going to *repent* from that way of thinking and instead trust in the good news of the Realm of God here and now?

That's the invitation of the gospel, to trust in the immanence, the presence, the connection, the oneness of God, Christ Among Us.

Not as a theory, but as a way of life. We *walk* by faith, not by sight.

As Alexander Shaia puts it, "we don't get there by hoping; we get there by now-ing."

Back to my 5th Grade plagiarism debacle. I mostly messed up the traditional kind of repentance, because I never did admit my transgression, much less actually ask anyone for forgiveness.

But, in the end, what I received from my classmates was actually a model of this deeper kind of *metanoia* of connection.

Miss Strite had every right to give me a zero, or bring a forced confession to the principal's office, both of which *terrified* me as the class know-it-all goody two-shoes. But instead, she gave me a chance to try again.

I deserved the hard cut lesson of a bad grade. But what Miss Strite realized, perhaps, was the deeper reality of a learning opportunity, to actually get at the creativity that the assignment was meant to bring out. When she let me write something new, the connection of a second chance--redemption--stayed with me far longer, and gave me a much better lesson, than a big fat ZERO and a lower mark in the class.

The same with my classmates. By lying so obviously, in front of the whole class, I was really vulnerable. They could have taunted me, made me pay for my sin and my general arrogance about my performance in school. And maybe some of them did; that seems likely. But what I remember is the handful of kids that told me they really liked my second story. And the others, who simply carried on and let me be part of the group as usually, no big deal.

They could have let me stay up here (hand raised high)--you got caught in a lie, both sinful *and* stupid. You deserve separation!

But they met me down here (hand moves underneath)--you're human. Grade 5 is hard. Welcome to the club, glad to see you struggle sometimes, too. You still belong here.

Up here--failure! It took you two tries, and what you did in the end wasn't really the assignment in the first place. Get outta here!

But underneath--that wasn't exactly how it was supposed to go, but I like where you took it in the end. You still have something to offer!

That's the repentance of *metanoia*, the movement from separation to connection, from division to union, in all things.

May Christ Among Us change our hearts and our minds, as we learn to walk in faith. May this be good news to you today.