

Epiphany 3, Year B, 2021

Well, St. Mark's, here we are at the beginning of the gospel of Mark and it is quite a beginning, here in the beginning of a new year, the day of our annual meeting. One way to approach this passage is to wonder about the pattern of the story. We hear of John the Baptist being arrested beginning a new era which moves from John's ministry to Jesus' ministry. Jesus proclaims a message in three parts: the time is fulfilled, repent, and have faith in the good news. Then he calls his disciples. To be like modern followers of Christ, we might follow this pattern as well: acknowledge that Jesus has begun a new era: the time has been fulfilled, repent, or turn from our ways so we might fully live into this reality, trust that the good news is true and meaningful, and invite others to live this way as well. First, would be this new era.

We have a lot of unhealthy theology that has long been part of our religion as Episcopalians and for Christians in general. A quick example is the Communion rail. Why do we have it? Originally it was a barrier to keep the animals away from the altar, some sources say. But it became a barrier to keep the people away from the altar. It sends a message that has led to unhealthy clericalism over the centuries. I mention this to point out that we have been working on being part of this new era from the beginning. But we haven't quite gotten there yet because we still struggle with Jesus' statement about the time being fulfilled.

This is the discussion about the difference between immanence vs. interventionism. One way to understand the difference is in a version of the Lord's Prayer we find in the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer: *Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven.* In whom is heaven. Interventionism pictures God in heaven while Immanence understands all things to be in God, including heaven. Immanence says that the Kingdom of God is all around us and a part of our everyday reality and interventionism is a way of believing in God where God is a man on a cloud looking down upon us and one day, if we are good, we will die and go to that cloud and everything will be ok. Both are found in scripture, but you may hear from my tone which one I prefer: the one Jesus is plainly mentioning here in the beginning of Mark's gospel; I prefer to understand the Creator and the Universe through the lens of immanence.

Why? Well, maybe by showing what interventionism does, I can show why immanence is the way to go. I have already mentioned the Communion rail which comes from centuries old approaches to understanding God that fall into the category of interventionism. Today, there are those among us who think it's ok to destroy the environment as though it were God's plan because this is all temporary, this is all *kronos* instead of *Kairos*. People believe that war can be a means to a greater end. That a nation's economy or the world economy are the only path to stable societies. I can go on. This thinking is baked into the bread and has become normalized to the point that few of us can even imagine an alternative. Sadly, it comes from a way of thinking about this world which separates it from the Kingdom of God. I would argue that this is a kind of lie we have found ourselves believing for centuries in so much of the world.

But we are invited to have faith in Jesus' truth – to believe in the good news which we find in his statement: the time is fulfilled. This term for time here is *Kairos*. It means time immemorial; time out of time. The cousin to this is earthly time, *kronos*, like chronology or chronological.

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Christians do not live by kronos but by Kairos. We acknowledge that part of the human experience is beyond human comprehension. This is why we pray and use symbols, because we know we are both intimately linked to something greater than ourselves and simultaneously unable to attain to it. As psalm 139 says: such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so great that I cannot attain to it.

We cannot attain to it and yet we have some responsibility in being party of it. Perhaps an analogy here might be like woodworking. If you make a good cut there is less work filing or sanding to complete the work. We are like artisans doing handy-work which can never be absolutely perfect, grace is through Jesus Christ who certainly has given us the tools and taught us to use them but is the only one able to bring us to full union with God, or perhaps we might say can bring us into spiritual perfection. So that living with immanence as a guiding perspective, brings us to a place of experiencing God's Kingdom as much as we can rather than the hatchet job that an interventionist approach produces. And isn't that what we want as Christians, to fulfill our part of the covenant, to do our part to live in God's presence, to experience the love of God as fully as we can? Of course it is.

Which is why Jesus says both that the time is fulfilled and that people must repent. Repentance is a change of heart and a change of direction. In scripture it is often a prerequisite for fully entering into God's presence or experiencing God's Kingdom. This is because much of scripture assumes that we aren't fulfilling our covenant with God. Last week I mentioned that it would be appropriate for all people in our land, beginning with ourselves at St. Mark's, to begin a season of repentance. The tragic events of the raid on our capitol are a reflection or manifestation of the deep rift we have in the United States, and as Christians who are responsible to reconcile all people to God and one another through Jesus Christ, we all bear some responsibility; we have all forgotten our covenant. Today's passage asks that in order to follow Jesus and fully enter into the Kingdom of God, we must first repent. How does this connect with the conversation around immanence rather than interventionism? I'm glad you asked.

Repentance acknowledges our human limitations. It comes from and brings us to a place of humility. Which is the proper disposition before God - and we are always in the presence of God. So we are always humble, which ties us to our human frailty. Which makes us open to seeing others as children of God, just as we are. Not Trump supporters or liberals, Republicans or Democrats, from here or from there. Just people doing our best in a great big universe far beyond our human limitations. Which brings us to the last part of our gospel today: answering the call to follow Jesus Christ. It's not enough to accept that we are all broken and try to live in humility. We have to invite people to come along. Jesus shared his ministry because he was inviting all people into this new era - into seeing that we are all in the Kingdom of God.

Yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn't mean we are not beloved children of God, one and all, living in a Kingdom greater than our imaginations can fathom, which somehow dwells within each of us giving us the power to be humble enough to repent and remember we are all far from polished, far from pristine but that doesn't mean we are not all beloved children of God. The time is fulfilled; repent; and share this good news.