

# THE TIME IS NOW

Mark 1:9-15

First Sunday in Lent (Series B)

February 18, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 1, verses 9 through 15. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 1, beginning at verse 9, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

<sup>12</sup> The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

The time is now. Jesus has come. He has fulfilled the expectations spoken of long ago in the prophets. He brought the Kingdom of God down to earth. So repent. Turn away from your sin. Turn away from false belief. Turn away from trust in yourself. And believe that Jesus is your Lord, who has redeemed you by his death and resurrection. "Repent and believe in the gospel."

We're going to focus this morning on these three words: *repent*, *believe*, and *Gospel*. When Jesus says, "Repent and believe in the gospel," that's really, really important. So we should understand what these words mean.

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Before that, though, we should take a broader look at this whole text. Every year, the gospel reading for the First Sunday in Lent is the temptation of Jesus. We hear it either from Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Those are the three gospels that record the event. This year we read it from Mark. His account of it is really short. The temptation itself is only two verses long.

You can read the longer account of Jesus' temptation in either Matthew 4 or Luke 4. They both describe how Satan tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread (Matt. 4:3-4; Luke 4:3-4), to test or prove God by jumping off the temple (Matt. 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-12), and to bow down and worship the devil (Matt. 4:8-10; Luke 4:5-8). With each temptation, Jesus resisted the devil, and he dismissed the temptation by quoting Scripture.

But Mark doesn't record any of that. It's much more of the view from forty thousand feet. And if you've ever looked out an airplane window, you know that you see things differently from far away. You see less and more at the same time.

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So perhaps we can notice how the temptation is related to the things around it. It comes immediately after Jesus' Baptism, and right before he begins his public ministry. It's the same order as Matthew and Luke, but when we zoom out, we see all of these things squished together. And hopefully we notice a pattern.

Jesus is going through the same things Israel went through in the Exodus. In Jesus' Baptism, we see a connection to Israel crossing the Red Sea. They obviously have water in common. But we see this connection most clearly when God the Father speaks and declares Jesus to be his Son. In the Old Testament, God refers to Israel as his son, whom he brought out of slavery in Egypt (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1). Now, at Jesus' Baptism, he reveals Jesus to be his Son.

And then, immediately after the Baptism, the Holy Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days. This reminds us of God casting Israel into the wilderness for forty years. Both were tempted in the wilderness. Israel gave into every temptation. But Jesus resisted every temptation. The point is that Jesus succeeds where Israel failed. He came to stand in the place of Israel and fulfill all righteousness for them and for the entire world.

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So then Jesus begins his public ministry. He preaches, "**The time is fulfilled.**" We see this fulfillment in the Baptism and temptation of Jesus. When he reenacts the story of Israel in himself, he reveals that he is the one whom the entire Old Testament looks forward to. Both in patterns and in specific prophecies, the entire Old Testament looks forward to the coming of Jesus. So he says, "**The time is fulfilled.**"

And for us, the time is still fulfilled. The time is still now. That's the thing about God and the way he fulfills things. When he fulfills something, it stays fulfilled. When he fulfills all righteousness, it stays fulfilled. When he brings the Kingdom of God down to earth, it stays here. Even when he ascends into heaven after his resurrection, the Kingdom remains, because Jesus is still with us. When he ascended, he said, "**Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age**" (Matt. 28:20). And when Jesus atones for sins, they stay atoned for.

The Kingdom of God came to earth when Jesus came to earth, because he is the King of heaven and earth. Wherever he is, the Kingdom is there too. It does not look like other kingdoms. It does not look like our political systems, because Jesus' Kingdom does not overthrow our political structures. Those kingdoms are under his universal Kingdom of Power. But his Kingdom of Grace comes and occupies the same physical space to do something else. He reigns in the Church to forgive our sins and draw us into himself.

The Kingdom of God is here now among us. We are members of Jesus Christ. We are baptized into him, so we are his body. When we gather as his body, around his Word and Sacraments, he is here among us, and he is doing his kingly work. He is delivering to us the forgiveness he won at the cross, and he is strengthening us as his body. This is a power that no earthly kingdom possesses. Here, right now, the Kingdom of God is present. And it is the most powerful kingdom in all the universe.

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So how do we react to this? Jesus came from heaven to earth. He suffered, died, and rose again for us. He is present with us now. How should we react to this? Jesus tells us. "**Repent and believe in the Gospel.**"

The words *repent*, *believe*, and *gospel* are very common words around here. You hear all three of these words every single time you come to church. So it's worth it, once in a while, to stop and define them.

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What does it mean to repent? Repentance can be defined as a turning or as a change. The key is what we turn from and what we turn to. It's a matter of what we are changed from and what we are changed into. There is a right way and a wrong way to understand this. We are often tempted toward the wrong way. The devil will look at us being Christians and say, "Okay, I guess I have to contend with that now." And the devil is very crafty; he always has been. He knows that it may be difficult to convince us to outright renounce the Christian faith. But if he can take something else and pass it off to us as "Christian." He may be able to entice us away from Christ without us knowing. And he does this with the false definition of repentance. He tempts us to think that repentance means turning away from bad deeds to good deeds. And our sinful natures actually like this, because our sinful hearts love everything the devil loves and they hate everything the devil hates.

This might seem kind of ironic, that the devil would want us to think that repentance is turning away from sin and doing good works. The devil isn't really bothered by good works, at least, not as much as he hates faith. And that's what the false definition of repentance leaves out. It leaves out faith. If we think that repentance means that we turn away from all the bad stuff we used to do, then we're just trusting in ourselves. We're trusting our own ability to be righteous. Our sinful natures take pride in this, and the devil is just fine with it, because it means that we will be trusting ourselves instead of Jesus as our Savior. It's a lie that we can even turn away from sin and do what is right. The devil tempts us into thinking we can, just like he tempted Adam and Eve into thinking that eating the fruit would be a good thing. He made them think that it would actually be a moral improvement for them, that they would be like God (Gen. 3:5). He tempted them toward something that looked good, but was really death, because it was not faith. They did not trust God's Word. So the devil also tempts us with moral improvement. Moral improvement is, of course, good. But if we trust in it, it is death, because it replaces trust in the only God who can save. If the devil could tempt us to believe just one thing, I think it would be this: he would like us all to believe that we are really, really good. Because then we won't look to Christ for the salvation we need. He's okay with letting us have a little bit of moral improvement so that we will think that we used to be bad and now we're good.

True repentance is this: that we turn away from unbelief, including the sin of self-righteousness, and we trust in Christ for salvation. We confess our sin, not just the bad things we do, but also our sinful natures. We acknowledge that we are incapable of saving ourselves. We acknowledge that we are incapable of turning ourselves around. Our only hope is for Jesus to save us.

So Jesus doesn't just say, "Repent," but, "Repent and believe." True repentance always blossoms into faith.

So what is faith? Or what does it mean to believe? In the Bible, *faith* and *believe* are the same word. So what does it mean? Some of the old theologians thought about this really hard, and they looked at this word in the Bible, and they said that saving faith has three aspects to it: *knowledge*, *assent*, and *trust*.

First: *knowledge*. To believe in the Gospel means that we know the Gospel is true. To believe something is not less than knowledge. The world often uses the word *believe* to mean something less certain than knowledge, and maybe this is another trick of the devil. It's like if someone asks, "Will it snow today?" and you say, "I believe so." In that case, we use the word "believe" interchangeably with "think." It's something less than knowledge. We think it will happen, but we won't know until it either does or doesn't. But that is not what the Bible means when it talks about faith or believing. It might be something we don't see yet (Heb. 11:1); and therefore, we

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might struggle with it. But it's still in the realm of knowledge. It is true, even when we feel uncertain. So first, faith is knowledge.

But saving faith is more than just knowledge. It's not enough to simply know that the Gospel is true. The second aspect of faith that the old theologians identified is *assent*. Another way to say that is that we affirm it or accept it to be true. Sometimes we know something is true, but we're not willing to admit it. We humans are contradictory creatures. We can know something, but not really know that we know it, because we don't want it to be true. Truth can stare us in the face, but we don't want to accept it. It's like when our spouse or a parent calls us out for doing something wrong. And we know that they're right, but we won't admit it. We won't assent to it. Instead, we stand our ground and say, "No! I'm not wrong! I know I'm right." Even though, deep down, we really know the truth that we are wrong. Or it's kind of like atheism or agnosticism. There really is no such thing as atheism. There is an innate knowledge of God that is instilled in every human heart. That doesn't mean that we understand who or what God is. The knowledge of the Trinity or the Gospel of Jesus Christ has to be revealed to us through the Word. But every human heart has some natural understanding that there is a god of some sort. But we might not want this to be true, so we don't assent to it. So this is the second aspect of saving faith. We know the Gospel is true, and we assent to it. We do this every Sunday when we confess one of the creeds.

Now I should clarify here that when the old theologians talked about knowledge and assent, they were not saying that saving faith depends on knowing the right things. It's not like you have to pass a tricky theology exam to be saved. That would just be another kind of salvation by works. Infants can have saving faith, even though they can't recite the creed. We know this is true, because Jesus spoke of little ones who believe in him (Matt. 18:6; Mark 9:42). He blessed infants and said that the Kingdom of God consists of children like them (Luke 18:15). And at the other end of life, when we slip into dementia, saving faith does not leave us just because we can't confess the creed or explain the atonement. When the old theologians spoke of knowledge and assent as the first two aspects of saving faith, they were talking about mature faith. When that baptized child grows up, they will learn the content of the Christian faith and give assent to it.

Then there's the third aspect of saving faith: trust. And this is really the point of identifying the three aspects of faith. You can know the Gospel is true. You can confess it to be true. But if you do not trust it, you are not saved. James speaks of the demons. He says, "Even the demons believe—and shudder" (James 2:19). The devil and his demons know the Christian faith. They even admit it to be true. Later in Mark 1, and we read about this a few weeks ago, a demon said to Jesus, "I know who you are—the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24). It had knowledge of Christ, and it assented to that knowledge, but it did not trust in Jesus. It was an enemy of Jesus.

Tragically, we might do the same thing. We might know the definition of the Gospel. We might confess that it is true. But we might not trust it. This is the thing that really scares me. We know that in the Church, there must be those people who know it's true, but they refuse to trust in it. The devil tempts us to trust in something else. He especially tempts us to trust in ourselves.

On Wednesday we heard Jesus talk about hypocrites in Matthew 6. And my mind is still kind of stuck on that. We usually think of a hypocrite as someone who says one thing but does another. But that's not really how Jesus defines it. Jesus speaks of hypocrites more like people who know the truth but do not trust it. Many of the Pharisees were hypocrites. Their hypocrisy was that they trusted themselves instead of trusting Jesus as their Savior. They, more than anyone, practiced what they preached. And they knew the Old Testament. They knew all the promises of God about the Messiah. But when Jesus appeared, they did not trust him. It wasn't

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because they didn't have knowledge. It wasn't even because they did not assent to that knowledge. But they trusted in themselves. They trusted in their own righteousness.

So how about you? Who do you trust in? Do you trust in yourself, or do you trust in Jesus? When you talk about your faith, what do you say? Do you talk about how strong your faith is? This might be really hard to hear, but I have to say it to you. And I hope you will humbly consider it. If you talk about how strong your faith is, I would be very concerned about you. Because what are you really trusting? Are you trusting yourself? Are you trusting your own righteousness or the strength of your faith? "Let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Or are you trusting in Jesus? The Gospel gives us freedom to acknowledge that we are weak. We even acknowledge that our faith is weak. But it saves because of the one we trust in.

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So Jesus says, **"Repent and believe in the Gospel."** So, finally, what is the Gospel? This is the most important thing of all, because this is what actually saves us. We might trust in all sorts of different things. And we might trust them very strongly. But if they are not able to save us, we will not be saved.

The word "Gospel" means good news. But it's not just any good news. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of your sins. Trust in this. Trust in what Jesus did for you on the cross.

He is the perfect Son of God. He came from heaven to earth. He endured every temptation we face. He endured them with resilience, patience, and trust in his Father. So he never gave in to any temptation. He succeeded where we habitually fail. And he did this for one purpose: so that he could go to the cross, be accused of sins he never committed, suffer for all the sins he never committed, and die.

This is the Gospel: that Jesus Christ died for all sins. He died for you sins. He died for our self-righteousness. He died for our weak faith. And he rose again from the dead. He lives forever as our shepherd. He protects us from falling into sin and unbelief. He is so much stronger than the devil. And on the Last Day he will raise our bodies from the grave and bring us into his new creation. This is the Gospel: that Jesus died and rose again for the forgiveness of your sins. And he gives you all these gifts by his grace.

So **"repent and believe in the Gospel."** That is, turn away from sin. Confess it as sin. Turn away from dead works. Stop trusting in yourself. And know that Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead. Confess this as true. And trust that he did this for you, in order to forgive your sins and bring you with him into the Kingdom of God. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.