

Mark 1:14–20

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 17 January 2012

On this Sunday of the Epiphany season, Jesus is manifested, revealed to us, as a preacher. And with that revelation we get a sample of his message. He is a preacher of repentance and faith. This is another of Jesus' titles, though we don't use it very often. He is King of kings and Lord of lords, Son of Man, Son of God; he has all the necessary messianic titles. He is also a preacher, and a great preacher. It is his preaching that expresses God's Word to us, and in his preaching life is bestowed.

He had a real advantage, of course, since he was the Word of God in the flesh. The Word was part of him; it was on his lips from beginning to end and expressed God the Father to us, so that the Father and the Holy Spirit became known to us through Christ's preaching. Even when we don't catch more than a glimpse, we nevertheless hear, and as we hear, life is bestowed. So he still expresses himself in the preached and sacramental Word, because he is the Word.

When he preaches, or when he is preached, a couple of things happen. One is repentance. We are brought out of ourselves. We lose our standing in ourselves, lose our grip on ourselves, and as we lose our grip and our lostness in ourselves, we are brought to rest in him. The first is repentance; the second is faith. We are brought beyond ourselves, which is repentance, and brought to rest in him, which is faith.

Each of the texts for this Sunday addresses a particular dimension of repentance and faith, so they're very interesting and a lot of fun. In the Gospel, Jesus comes preaching his message and winds up with a boatload of disciples, a boatload of fishermen. The catchers get caught. And with fishermen on his stringer, having captured his disciples, Christ Jesus sends his Word out even further and takes them up into himself and into his mission. That is, he brings these men to faith and sends them out.

The supporting texts follow suit. I always think of Jonah as a great biblical joke. I've preached on the book several times, and it's almost impossible to preach on Jonah without the

congregation getting the joke and joining right in. It's hilarious. He's on his second trip to Nineveh now, up there in Assyria, and the preacher of repentance is going to have to repent himself. Just as the fishermen get caught, the catcher gets caught. The preacher of repentance is brought to repentance and sent back into the city, and lo and behold, his preaching works. Who would ever have expected that? Pretty soon the whole town is in a sweat, clinging to the promise of God's Word. That's lots of fun.

Psalms 62 is a wonderful example of just what repentance looks like. Here we get a little laboratory where we can watch repentance at work, what happens when repentance and faith happen. And finally we get one of the great repentance texts in all the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, where Paul introduces his great “as though”: let those who have wives live as though they had none. It's a confusing passage, but it's fun and very insightful, as usual with the apostle Paul.

So we'll sort our way through these four texts and have some fun along the way. We'll start with the Gospel, which sets up the themes for this Sunday. It's part of the Epiphany light show, with the beacon rotating and giving us glimpses, little pictures of the various dimensions of Jesus' life and ministry. Here, as the beacon swings and the light focuses, it focuses on him in the pulpit. He's preaching; not necessarily in a pulpit, but in the act of handing over the Word.

The Dark Background

The Gospel begins with some very chilling words, directly antithetical to everything that has been declared about what is being undertaken here. John the Baptist has already been identified in the first verses of Mark's Gospel as the beginning of the gospel of God. His appearance, his preaching, is the turning point. Now everything is going to change; everything is going to move. The kingdom is coming, and the turning point has arrived. But our text begins with words that appear to contradict that: “Now after John was arrested.” The beginning of the gospel of God has been arrested. The one who came to announce the dawn of the new, who came in the power of the gospel to call people to repentance and faith, is already in jail. And since his destiny and the destiny of Jesus are so closely linked, what happens to John the Baptist foreshadows what is coming for Jesus. Jesus is barely on the scene, and already we can see his death looming. If they arrest John the Baptist and cut off his head after a young girl's striptease, you can imagine what is coming for Jesus. Already we have a grim aspect.

In fact the sequence in Mark 1 emphasizes this. The gospel begins with the coming of John the Baptist and his arrest. When Jesus is baptized, he is driven into the wilderness to be tempted. John's arrest and Jesus' trip into the wilderness indicate where the beginning of the gospel of God takes place. This is where the gospel happens: in jail cells, in the arrest of someone sent in Jesus' name, in the wilderness. And that wilderness is not simply spatial or geographical. There are all kinds of wildernesses: an emotional wilderness, an economic wilderness, a wilderness of pain, a wilderness of sorrow. The beginning of the gospel of God takes place in such a way that the beginner is arrested and Jesus is sent out into the wilderness to be tempted.

This is the dark background of the gospel. The gospel enters the world as the antithesis of this darkness, but as its antithesis it enters into the darkness. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." If you have stood beside a hospital bed waiting for a dear member of the congregation to die, if you have sat waiting for a child to come home in the wee hours of the night, if you have lived in the anxiety of bad health reports, you know this wilderness. You've been there, and you know other people, of course, who live in it.

So the gospel begins here. It begins with the arrest of the one who is the beginning of the gospel of God. It begins in the wilderness, and this dark background immediately fills in even as we begin to hear Jesus preaching. This is his trademark. Just as the wilderness goes wherever John the Baptist goes, temptation goes wherever Jesus goes. That is always where he is, in the midst of temptation, and that is where he becomes the preacher and where he preaches most powerfully and effectively. He enters into the wilderness and into the temptation, and it's right there at the table, in the presence of the enemy, that he starts to cook.

So we must begin with this. Repentance and faith share this dark background. Jesus, the preacher of repentance and faith, comes into temptation to call to repentance, to bestow it, and to grant faith by his Word. Precisely in this context of loss and misery and being overwhelmed, the Word occurs and hope occurs, and hope works.

Thrown, and Found

It's quite interesting. As you probably know, I don't put a lot of stock in church growth. But a couple of years ago I read a really interesting study that used the methods of sociology, the kind of thing that got David into trouble when he took a census, to study people who join churches. That's a real interesting question. We talk all the time about bringing people to

Christ Jesus, as of course we should, and we rejoice when people come. But who are they? What do they look like? The sociologists and psychologists got out their abacuses and adding machines and all their great questions, and when they went and talked to these people, what they discovered was that almost every one of them came out of a crucifixion. They had lost a job, or a sister, or a brother-in-law, or a marriage. They had been dislocated one way or another, so dislocated that they did something they had never thought of doing before: they went to church. Or they met someone from a congregation who spoke the Word to them. And that combination of being thrown and hearing a word that helped in the midst of it was what brought them in the door and held them there.

So what we see biblically we also see, peeping through, sociologically and psychologically. In the background there is darkness, sorrow, pain, and loss. People who have been dislocated start looking around for something that holds, and in the midst of that, Christ Jesus finds them. That's just how it works. It is in this context of dislocation that the Word is spoken and takes hold.

This is the combination: death and resurrection, repentance and faith. We get thrown; we lose our grip; in Paul's language, we die. We are removed from the normal context in which we assume ourselves safe and secure and beyond reach. We are thrown into the open, where our protection evaporates and we're not sure where to look. And in the midst of being thrown into the open, repentance has started. We are losing our grip on ourselves even as another takes his grip on us. And when we look up and see that it is Christ Jesus who has us by the shirt collar, who has grabbed our hand, who is pulling us out and bringing us to himself, then we say, "Yes, Lord, I want that." That's faith itself.

So it's quite simple. Repentance is losing yourself. Faith is being brought under the grip of Christ Jesus. Repentance is being thrown, being dislocated, losing that to which our hearts cling, so that we recognize ourselves as being sustained and carried in faith. This is the rhythm of the Christian life, the two-step, the dance in which we follow after Christ. We go down each day through daily repentance; every day we have to be taken beyond ourselves, and every day we have to be brought to rest in Christ Jesus.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who brings us to repentance and brings us to faith. You can't imagine for a minute that Christ Jesus would leave this to us. You know exactly what would happen. Either we would organize a crusade, talk about ourselves as the truly repentant, and start inquiring why nobody else is quite like us; or we would lose heart altogether, become

convinced that we have not and cannot and never will repent, convict ourselves of unbelief, and have nowhere to turn. In fact Christ Jesus sends his Spirit to administer repentance and faith in us, to bring it about.

“I’m Changing My Wife’s Pants”

I may have told you some of these stories, but I’ll risk another one. For seventeen straight years I went up to a Bible camp in Alberta, near Bentley, at a beautiful lake. It was called Camp Kuriakos, and I still love those people. I went up there every year because Edmund Smits, a great professor at Luther years ago, a Latvian displaced by the war, “Papa Smits,” asked me to go. I started going, and I liked those people so much that I kept going until my wife finally put her foot down. I would work myself to death, come home exhausted, and be no good for a couple of weeks afterward.

Up there I got to know a family I came to love. They were Danish immigrants to Canada. He was a schoolteacher and an old Canadian radical, a member of the NDP, the New Democratic Party, the Canadian socialists. He was just fabulous; we had more fun. He had a smart-mouthed daughter from Winnipeg who was just as much fun and loved to bait Yankees. I got to know them quite well. I was teaching the Psalms, and I suppose preaching them too. I love the Psalms, and I was teaching a psalm a day up there. One day I noticed that the old man was weeping, and afterward I went and put my arm around him and said, “You’re doing all right.” He turned to me and said, “I’m changing my wife’s pants.” That’s all he said.

That’s what it is to be thrown. Everything you assume, everything you take for granted, everything you count on, everything you look to and take security from, is taken from you one way or another. And when it’s taken from you, you discover that Christ’s hands are under your shoulders and his Word in your ears is pulling you out. That’s repentance, this self-loss, and that’s faith, and it goes on your whole life.

This is not some Baptist Bible-camp experience where you can talk forever about how you gave your life to Christ. What garbage. A friend of mine used to brag about having been converted two hundred and thirty-eight times at the same Bible camp. Every time he gave his life to Christ, some teenage beauty who was filling out resplendently came and sat down beside him and destroyed all his resolutions to newness of life. That’s the way the flesh works. For crying out loud, we don’t have a chance against it.

But the Holy Spirit, as John says, convicts the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. The Spirit convicts us of sin, and in convicting us of sin brings God's Word home to us in such a way that we say, "I'll take all I can get of that. Say it again, say it again. I want that over and over." That's the promise of faith.

So this is what Jesus is preaching, and this is the heart of his message: both movements. He is the Preacher, with a capital P, and as the Preacher what he preaches is repentance and faith. Only here's the difference. Other people talk about repentance and faith ad nauseam. Jesus bestows it. He works it in you, so that by the time he's done with you he has torn you out of that old garbage and brought you to rest in him, so that you can rejoice and say, "I'll take a little more, please." That's just great.

Jonah: The Preacher of Repentance Repents

So we've got a Gospel that's full, and supporting texts that are a lot of fun. We'll take a couple of minutes on each and see if we can work through them. They're delightful.

First, Jonah 3:1–5, 10. Here we see another preacher of repentance. Jesus is the Preacher; this is a preacher on a par with one of us. He has gotten a little sick of his message. He's not sure it works, and he's tired of preaching. He says, "I've been ordained all these years. I've been called to be a prophet all these years, and I don't think I've ever made a single convert. I don't know what I'm doing here." Well, this is ridiculous. And then all of a sudden he gets called and sent to Nineveh, of all places. It must be north of Stanley, or somewhere down the road from Winnebago, or up near Duluth someplace. He gets sent up there to preach repentance.

Now we come into the text. He's already been swimming. He's already been vomited out of the belly of the fish, and now he's going to Nineveh the second time, the first trip having been an absolute disaster. And so he gets to Nineveh. Even though he has utterly failed, gotten nowhere, and run and tried to hide from his vocation, he heads into Nineveh with his fingers crossed and his toes crossed, hoping against hope that this won't be too much trouble. And he starts out with the most bare-naked, unvarnished kind of message, hellfire-and-brimstone preaching of repentance: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Maybe he really shortened up the message and tried to make it as offensive as possible. He wasn't very happy with the Ninevites, and he wasn't very eager to see much come of his preaching anyway.

But God's Word doesn't depend on the preacher, and it doesn't always depend on its own content. It depends on God speaking it. And when God speaks, repentance and faith follow. So he preaches this oddball message, a word of destruction and fear. We'd say, "Well, that's the law for sure. He's not going to get anywhere." He was going to scare the hell out of them to get heaven into them, as the saying used to go. But God's Word does what it says, and pretty soon repentance and faith are breaking out all over Nineveh, and the whole blamed city repents.

Now isn't that enough to tick Jonah off? He could have gone down to Florida and started his own church-growth clinic. He could probably even have made it in Phoenix. But he's mad, and he goes up on the side of the hill, and the rest of the story is hilarious, more fun than a barrel of monkeys. The preacher of repentance repented. God worked on him until he not only carried the message into the city, successfully, thank goodness, because God was at work in the message, but afterward came, regretfully, to see that preaching successfully there wasn't so bad. At least we hope so, anyway.

Psalm 62: For God Alone My Soul Waits

Psalm 62 provides a beautiful example of repentance at work. If you're ever tempted to preach on one of the psalms, this is a great one. The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible, as they're commonly called. My wife and I read a psalm every day; I can't live without them. They disclose the shape of faith. You can see what faith looks like when you read the Psalms, and I can tell you of days in our lives when a psalm has reached out and held us and carried us in the face of disastrous stuff, in the most magnificent and powerful way.

So here you get a really good one. Sometimes the Psalms sound as if they were recited at an AA meeting. Sometimes they're so full of hostility and contempt that you really wonder. Sometimes the psalmist is so self-righteous and pious that you'd hate to have to sit beside him. But even so, God is working through his Word, and we count on that.

So we can see what the psalmist shows us. What is causing him to turn away from himself? What is taking him beyond himself? In verses 3 and 4 he names his trouble: he is under attack from his community. All of you have gone to an annual meeting. You men and women have been there and done that, and you know how it works. If that's not enough for you, you have friends who sometimes turn into enemies. And if that's not enough, one of the bishops will arrange something without necessarily any request. So we learn that those we've counted on, relied on, and entrusted ourselves to are not necessarily so very reliable. Verses 3 and 4 detail

this: he's under attack from his neighbors. "How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence? Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence. They take pleasure in falsehood." I'll bet you a dollar to a donut that if you haven't had this experience, you won't have to wait too long. This is the way life works. The psalmist trusted his friends, relied on them, shared the faith with them, and now they've turned against him and dumped him and are after him with their accusations.

Verses 9 and 10 again show what has driven him out of himself. It doesn't matter whether the neighbors are rich or poor, of low estate or high estate; they don't carry much weight in the balance. They're not to be trusted. But the psalmist has been pushed a little further than this.

One of my favorite resources is the little AA prayer book, the Alcoholics Anonymous prayer book. Its prayers speak of rehearsals, remembrances, of retaliation and revenge, particularly rehearsals of retaliation. Here is how the bondage of the will shows itself in us. We discipline ourselves, push ourselves, try to forgive and try to forget, even though that's impossible, and somehow, one way or another, we get dragged back into former disappointments, start taking an inventory of those who have hurt us, and then start rehearsing visions of retaliation:

"When I get hold of him, this is what I'm going to say. Boy, I could really tell him," and so on and so forth. That bondage sets such a subtle grip that we're not even aware of it even as we're being carried along.

So our psalmist says: "Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them." Extortion and robbery are threats when you're thinking about how other people got their stuff inappropriately. This guy has been to a couple of AA meetings himself. He knows the temptations are not just in the neighbors but in the hungry heart that is seeking itself. So in verses 3 and 4, and 9 and 10, he leaves this behind. He is being pulled beyond it. This is repentance: being pulled beyond it.

And he is being put into faith. So we can see a rhythm. In verses 1 and 2, 5 and 6, and at the end of the psalm, we see the psalmist being pulled toward God and his promises. "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken." We get this dear sense of the promises of God and his utter goodness. And verses 7 and 8: "On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God." And finally, at the end of the psalm, the steadfast love of the

Lord. He has turned against himself, against what pulls him down into himself, and he is in the grip of the promise, being held and sustained. That's true faith.

1 Corinthians 7: As Though

And finally we get a wonderful text from the apostle Paul, one of the great repentance texts in all of Scripture. It's complicated, as usual with the apostle Paul: if he can say something simply, he can find a way to make it more difficult. He is discussing our earthly attachments, and in that context he speaks specifically of marriage.

Now this is where the First Commandment gets broken: "You shall have no other gods before me." As Luther explains the First Commandment, we are to fear, love, and trust God above all things. That is, we turn to God for every good, depending on him. And yet when I think of what God looks like: blonde, about five foot seven, slim, lovely. She is God's face to me. So, as Paul says, the married man seeks to please his wife, as the married woman seeks to please her husband. God is mediated to us through those closest to us, whether in marriage or in friendship. And since God is mediated to us this way, we confuse the one mediating with the one being mediated. And so we exalt the creature over the Creator.

We get tied up in these creaturely relations. They're not the bad ones; they're the best ones. They are not temptations in the sense that we are being tempted to some visible form of evil. They are temptations in the sense that we are drawn into overinvestment. We start asking more of our partners than they can possibly provide. We start asking more of our children than they can give. We start asking more of our congregations than they can possibly be, more of the church than it can grant. And then we alternate between cynicism and pride, going from one side to the other, expecting too much and disappointed that we got so little.

So Paul advises us to live with these mediations "as though." What that means is that you receive with thanks the one through whom God mediates goodness. Of course, all things are consecrated through thanksgiving. But you don't expect them to be what only God can be. For those of us deep in marriages, it means we expect our spouses to provide protection; those of us deep in friendships, the same. We expect those with whom God surrounds us to protect and care for us, but we know who is working through them, and we know who is finally responsible for what they are doing.

And so we live with a kind of eschatological qualifier. We live "as though." We love and we give thanks, but we don't entrust ourselves overly. We ask God to be God and the neighbor to

be the neighbor, and we keep them, the ultimate and the penultimate, clearly distinguished. This is the problem, and this is Paul's solution: to receive the other, whom God uses to mediate, as a gift, but not to ask more of the gift than the giver himself provides.

There we go. I think this would be a tough text to preach, but you can talk with people about it in depth. I've had some of these conversations with recent widows. I've been talking with my dear auntie down in Westby about her husband, my uncle, who just passed away. She makes the distinction between what she received from dear Dale and what God has given, and it is more that God has given. With Dale gone, she is still receiving out of God's hand, even though the medium of the last sixty years is gone. That's freedom: we receive with joy what God gives us through such people, and yet at the same time we know that when they're gone, God will still be there. So to live "as though" is not to treat them as a fiction. It is to recognize the giver behind the gift, and, recognizing the giver behind the gift, to fear, love, and trust God rather than the medium God is using.

Is that as clear as mud? Is that fun? It leads to a very interesting and very productive discussion, probably harder to handle in a pulpit than in a face-to-face conversation, or maybe in a class. Anyway, you've got enough to play with in the other texts. And if you've been in your congregation long enough to preach on that 1 Corinthians 7 text, it would be great.

God's peace. Any questions? We've got three minutes; I left you a lot of time, didn't I? As I told you, I'm going to be in Ethiopia for the next month, but I've recorded one class period with Julie, so next week's lecture is already on tape, and as the internet works over there I'll be sending in material for the weeks following.

Questions and Answers

A comment applying the distinction to other mediators of God's gifts.

That's wonderful. That's just the place to use it, because there you can see the distinction quite clearly. There are other mediators of the gift, and they show up in the most surprising places. You've been around church basements after funerals. Some of the people you would never guess would deliver the goods just start spilling over with graciousness. God will provide, all right.

A comment from a pastor about being given the right words at a hard moment.

Oh, that's so fabulous. God trusted you, to give you an opportunity like that. That's just terrific. He provides the right words. God bless you. What an experience to have.

A comment that people get repentance and then lose it.

That's exactly right. They get it and they lose it, because the self wants to take charge of repentance. It wants to make repentance into a project, an achievement, and to measure its own repentance. Well, if the first thing that happens in repentance is self-loss, good luck: watching yourself, watching yourself, watching yourself. That's garbage. You can't go that way. A long time ago I gave up on winning these battles for good; you just know they're going to occur. But you keep preaching and keep clarifying and keep saying, "Christ will do this. He's good at it. He will bring you to repentance, and when he gets you there it will be just right. You can count on him for that." So you keep bearing witness this way. They hate it, all right, I can guarantee you that. But he's good at it.

A comment that repentance is a daily dying and rising.

You've got it right on the money. That's exactly right. It's a daily dying and rising. He can do that. He's doing it to you, and he will do it.

God's peace to you, my friends. You know my deep joy in you and my confidence in you. Christ is at work in you. I'll remember that story for a long time. I won't be able to talk back and forth with you, but we'll work it from Ethiopia, and then I'll see you after the sixteenth of February. My thanks to you. Keep me in your prayers.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqyVxxdY4gs>

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