

"Cleaning Out the Basement"

Mark 1:4-11; Mark 1:14-20

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 21, 2018—3rd Sunday after Epiphany—Rev. Ronald Botts

For a number of years, we don't know how many, a man named John stirred up his little corner of the world. Word passed from person to person that there was something different and compelling about this strange fellow out in the countryside. There was a drawing power that brought people to hear this man, this "holy" man, who especially connected with the common people.

John wasn't part of mainstream religion in his day. He wasn't one of the priests who presided over the Temple or one of the scholarly Pharisees or Scribes who attempted to interpret the Law and encouraged obedience to their understanding. He wasn't an ascetic or hermit who withdrew to live closer to God, as his simple manner of dress and his demeanor might first suggest.

As the crowds grew, a question grew with them: Who, exactly, was this John? Was he a political leader in waiting? Was he a prophet? Or was he even the predicted Messiah?

John answered them by saying that he was no more than an advance man, someone who was charged with identifying the Promised One expected from earliest times. He said that his role was to prepare the way for a greater one, for whom he was not even qualified to tie his sandals.

Then one day a carpenter from Nazareth appeared where he was preaching, and John declared, "This is the one. He is here!" That man, whom John identified and baptized, that man who was named Jesus, later stepped out at the appointed time and began to teach and preach on his own.

John had told the crowd that this awaited person would baptize people, not with water, but with the very Spirit of God. John's own purpose was to announce this expected one. So, of course, people wanted to know what this new preacher-prophet would say. On John's word they sensed that his message would be one which the world was awaiting.

That's where our text of the day begins. We're told that Jesus came to Galilee "proclaiming the good news of God." I'm sure that the first century world would have had its full array of marketplace hucksters, second-rate politicians, and dishonest merchants. The people would have heard plenty of fake news down through the years. But now, at last, here was someone with good news not just about God, but *from* God!

And what is this "good news"? Mark goes on to tell us. The good news is that "the time is fulfilled"—that is, the waiting is over—and "the kingdom of God has come near." This is the good news the Jews had been prepared to hear for years. In fact, they'd been waiting for at least 600 years, and perhaps even more. The people thought this would mean the end of oppression by enemy nations. There had been a long stream of such occupiers—the

Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans. So if, indeed, the kingdom of God was near, that was surely good news at long last.

But then there's the bad news that came along with the good. It took the form of a little six-letter word: *Repent*. It's an action verb directed to everyone with ears to hear. This was troubling.

People were given the assurances of a coming kingdom of God, but Jesus told them only way one can get there is through a very narrow gate called *repentance*. And that's a gate many avoid because the entry is strenuous, no matter how desirable the outcome.

A noted Jewish scholar from the past defined repentance as "a fierce fight with the heart." Fierce, indeed, because to repent first means to admit that we've been wrong about things. It is to acknowledge that something is indeed amiss. And whether there have been extenuating circumstances or not—and of course, sometimes there are—nevertheless, it requires coming to grips with an unpleasant reality about ourselves.

Whatever the role of others in contributing to our problems, it doesn't exonerate our part in past or present wrongs. Until we face up to ourselves and take responsibility for what we have done, or failed to do, we will never find our way fully into the kingdom of heaven. The door is narrow, but not impossible.

There's an important sequence to note in the words of Jesus: "Repent, and believe in the good news." He said we're not really ready to hear the good news, or to understand it, until we get some of the roadblocks out of our minds and hearts. Most of us want to believe, but in truth, our hearts and minds are often too cluttered with the stuff of daily living to leave much room for faith.

Since the death of my mother I have had to almost snake through our basement even to get to the laundry room. It's so filled now with the things from her life, added to the things from our life, that the pathway has gotten almost entirely blocked. I realize how that has happened, but it doesn't really eliminate the problem. The truth is that I've just got to take the initiative to sort and move these impediments out of the way for good. I can't tell you how much I don't want to deal with this.

My wife is sympathetic to a point, but then usually ends up by reminding me, "They're **your** family's keepsakes. I can't decide what stays or goes, You have to do it or it won't get done. Simple as that."

So what can I do? I know she's right. I have to take responsibility or we both suffer the consequences. With no siblings the job is mine, and mine alone. I don't even have children to pull into the fray. I'm the one who has to step up. Have you ever had a situation like that, too?

Similar to our basements or attics, what most people need in life is a major internal cleansing. We have to look at the many obstacles that get in our way of realizing that greater life Christ has promised us. We have to see the many obstructions present between our lesser self and the promise of a greater self. Jesus called this repentance.

There are all kinds of blockages. For example, there are some people so enamored with themselves that they are unable to really get in touch with others. There are some people so enthralled by wealth that they cannot help but sacrifice the need of others to get greater gain for themselves. There are some people who have hurt others or violated their rights, but whose egos demand that they deny those realities. Conversely, people often fail to do things when the time was right to take initiative.

The door to that promised kingdom of God is the same today as it was when Jesus announced it some 2,000 years ago. We have to be sorry for the past, sorry for how we are now, sorry for what we have not yet become. And from **that** point, with God's help and with the grace made available to us, we can then begin to enter into that better place.

So what does this mean to people like you and me? Most of us have some hidden corners in our lives, but nothing that would sell tabloids at the checkout counter. What do we have to repent of?

We should be sorry for the things we have done that we shouldn't have done, and for things we ought to have done that we have left undone. We should be sorry for the bitterness we allow to lodge in our hearts, crowding out faith and love. We should be sorry that we allow ourselves to become irritated with people when we should be relating to them as sisters and brothers. We should be sorry to spend so much time fretting about things that don't really matter or pursuing one amusement after another.

And we should be sorry for the things we leave undone. All the chances missed. All the opportunities never taken advantage of. All the people we never get around to telling how much they mean to us. All the chances to stand up for others when they really need our support. These failures, these omissions, are really a daily occurrence. We regularly lose occasions to follow in the ways of Jesus because we can't be bothered or just fail to recognize possibilities right there in front of us. We see, but we don't see. We realize, but don't act.

Sometimes we just need to stop and admit how far we are from being the better selves we know we can be. Then when we do get to that point of realization, a light may come on in our lives and we can see that each day we can move a bit forward. Christ reaches out to us with a hand of love and offers his help in moving ahead. We are not stopped by our sins, but are shown the way to get through all the clutter and step into new possibilities.

Somehow we have gotten the idea that repentance is a one-time occurrence. That's a misunderstanding. We have to look at ourselves each day, be honest and make amends if possible, then move forward with God's help. That daily consideration is what really opens the door to all the promises given us. That's how **our** lives are changed and how we can help others to change **their** lives.

Repentance is not only for the new believer, but for established one as well. Think of it as a daily tune-up, a course correction which leads us on to the fullness of life.