**Mark 1:4-11 Baptism of Jesus**

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” Anyone remember who said that? Yep, good old John the Baptist, known for wearing camel’s hair clothing, eating locusts and honey, and telling the people to “prepare the way for the Lord” by, well, repenting.

Repentance. It’s a word that has a lot attached to it, doesn’t it? Let’s take a second and just be curious about what that word ***repentance*** does for us. Maybe it brings up a specific memory, or causes your stomach to ball up just a little. Maybe there are feelings of guilt or like you’ve been caught doing something wrong. Maybe you’re thinking UGH why do we have to talk about this. Or maybe you’ve never thought about it before and you’re like “wait what’s she talking about.”

In her poem “Wild Geese,” Mary Oliver wrote “You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting,” and that is the prevailing image of the word repentance that has existed in our culture for a long time – that when we do something wrong, we mess up, we SIN, in order to get back into God’s good graces we need to do some penance. God needs to see us suffer a little and apologize and then, and only then, we can be forgiven and redeemed.

But friends, if you are carrying something heavy like that on your heart today I want you to know that not only is that transactional understanding of how God works painful and unhelpful, it’s not even the correct use of the word that is written in Mark’s gospel.

Before we get to the deep heart stuff, we need to start with a little grammar lesson. Mark’s gospel was originally told and then written in Greek, and the word he used here was “metanoia” – often translated into English as “repentance” with all of the baggage that word now carries in the 21st century, but what metanoia actually means is “a changing of the mind.” Nothing about guilt or payback or walking on our knees for a hundred miles in the desert or anywhere else.

Instead of using the English word repentance, the bible translation we read from today gets a little closer to that original Greek word, and it says “John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that **they were changing their hearts and lives**” (*Mark 1:4 Common English Bible*). This wording invites us into the idea that “metanoia” or changing of hearts and lives, is a ***process*** not a one-time thing. It’s not a transaction wherein we are sinful, wicked creatures, we get baptized, and now we’re good and God loves us. It’s a lifetime of walking with God and accepting God’s grace over and over and over.

Baptism in our tradition is what St. Augustine called “an outward sign of an inward grace” – the amazing grace that is always on offer to us. We don’t have to repent or do anything at all to get God to turn to us; God is always turned towards us. God is always loving and forgiving. Nothing we do can change that, and what a relief it is to know that God’s nature doesn’t depend on us! When we celebrate baptism, we are celebrating something that has already happened – our sacrament using holy water is the outward sign of the grace that is present inside of us. We are already loved and forgiven, and through the sacrament of baptism we claim that love and grace.

One of the things we really struggle with, however, is remembering it for the rest of our lives. There are so many things in this world telling us that we aren’t good enough – not smart enough, not charming enough, not kind enough, not patient enough. We hear day in and day out that we need to be better at our jobs, better parents, better students, better friends. We walk around feeling anxious about doing the right thing, about trying to fit in, about being too young or too old or too loud or too quiet or too weird or not talented enough or athletic enough or normal enough. And all this time, when we have those thoughts running through our head, God is saying to us “You are beloved. ***You*** are beloved. You are chosen and blessed, you are mine.” But we don’t always hear those words.

Author and theologian Henri Nouwen’s book *Life of the Beloved* is part memoir, part reflection on God’s nature and our belovedness, and in it he wrestles with his personal struggle in believing that he was good enough to be loved by God. He writes “I kept running around it in large or small circles, always looking for someone or something able to convince me of my Belovedness. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence” *(Life of the Beloved).*

He goes on to explain that it’s in our nature to always be seeking that feeling of belovedness, but we are usually looking in the wrong places. We think “maybe this book, idea, course, trip, job, country, or relationship” will bring us fulfillment, but all this searching does is lead us further into spiritual and emotional exhaustion, disappointed by how the next thing didn’t turn out to be what we needed after all.

To remember our belovedness takes real effort when there are so many voices telling us otherwise, when we feel in our very being that we’re not good enough and that message overpowers everything else. And we can try self help and affirmations and positive thinking, we can try to BE better and DO better, but the truth is that being beloved has nothing to do with anything we can do or be or achieve. God coming near to us has nothing to do with our own actions or willpower, but rather is only to do with God wanting to draw near to us. Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote “There’s nothing we do to make our way to God. God is continually coming to us and interrupting our lives and wanting to be known.” Every year on New Years’ Day, Nadia reminds us that there’s not one single new years resolution that, if kept, would make us more worthy of God’s love. We simply ARE beloved, and that applies all year.

So if we get rid of the idea that we have to earn God’s love, that we have to repent and ask forgiveness and act like better people in order to receive that grace, then what motivation do we possibly have to follow John’s call to “metanoia”? To change our hearts and our lives?

I like to think of it as a cup or a bowl that is overflowing. God pours God’s extravagant outrageous inconceivable love into us, and it’s so big and so joyful and so LOVING that it overflows and spills out of us, into the world. When we acknowledge our belovedness, our lives are changed. When we have a confidence that we are loved by God, out of us spills the desire to be generous, to be kind, to lift up others. Henri Nouwen writes “When we claim and constantly reclaim the truth of being the chosen ones, we soon discover within ourselves a deep desire to reveal to others their own choseness.” It’s like the complete and joyful opposite of the phrase “hurt people hurt people” – when we feel blessed we bless others.

We respond to God’s love for us by seeking justice in this world and working to make our communities more like the kingdom of heaven. We respond by sharing what we have with others, and by standing up and speaking out against racism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. We respond by calling for an end to war and genocide.

When we remember deep in our bones that we are God’s own child, loved beyond measure, what overflows and spills out of us is an almost automatic “metanoia.” And there it is. Repentance.

Instead of striving and working to repent – so that I can be loved, what if we start with “I am loved, and that leads to effortless repentance”? Suddenly I don’t have such a knot in my stomach at hearing the word. Suddenly the pressure is off to live a better life, to keep track of my sins, to try and do more good to make up for the bad I have cast into the world. Suddenly I feel… free.

We go through some days with the knowledge of God’s love humming along in the background like a soundtrack to everything we do. Maybe some people experience this most of the time. But for the rest of us, we need reminders. We need to come to church and say to each other over and over “you are loved.” We need to read it in the scriptures. We need to sing it in the songs that we take with us in our hearts as we head out the door in the morning. We need to see it in the prairie sunrise that on some days feels like it was painted just for us. We need to feel it in time spent with our loved ones, when we laugh so hard we can’t breathe or when we share our deepest hurts and fears with a trusted friend.

And so my dear ones this morning I ask you to hear these words, spoken with truth and tenderness and all the urgency in the world… You are beloved. You are beloved. You are beloved. Now go out into the world and live your lives as you overflow with that wonderful truth.

Amen.