

What does it mean to repent? The word comes up a lot in Scripture. It's come up a lot recently as I've been talking to people too, it seems. And it's the core command that Jesus preaches in our Gospel lesson today.

In fact, it's the very first command that Jesus gives in Mark's entire Gospel. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom is at hand. So repent. Repenting is the first thing Jesus tells people to do. And that word becomes the key word whenever he meets someone. It's kind of a summary of what he taught, what he preached, what he wanted his miracles to bring about in people's lives.

So what does it mean? Well, repentance has a fairly simple definition. It means to turn away from one thing and to turn to something else. It's like driving a car and making a U-turn. Repentance is a U-turn from one direction to another.

Repentance means you're headed in the opposite direction from where you were once going. When Jesus uses the word repent, he is calling people to turn away from anything that leads away from him and to turn instead toward him.

That's his first command. Then comes his second command: believe. Believe not just anything, but believe in the gospel. Believe in Jesus. Trust him. Turn toward him. Hold on to him. Embrace the good news he brings.

'Repent and believe' is the heart of Jesus' message whenever he speaks. Whenever he acts. He says and does lots of things over the next three years. But this the heart of his ministry: Repent of sin. Believe in him.

Why? Because the time had come. The time had been fulfilled. Or, to use Paul's phrasing, the fullness of time had come.

All the history of Israel. All the words of the prophets. All the events of the world happening around them. Most of all, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. All of it was now ready. It was the moment to act. Not just for Jesus, but for everyone who heard him. The time was fulfilled.

Fulfilled for... what? The coming of the kingdom of God. Usually when we think of a kingdom, we picture some country or place. The United Kingdom is found on a map. You can trace its borders. See the territory it encompasses.

But Jesus is not talking about a geographical place when he says "kingdom." No, he is talking about the rule of God in this world and in our lives. He is talking about his kingship in this world.

Because the kingdom of God is wherever the king is. Which is exactly why he can say that it is at hand. It is right here! He is the king. He is standing right here on earth, among his creatures. Therefore, the kingdom of God is here.

It surrounds him and everyone who comes near to him. Every person that Jesus touched, by physically or spiritually, was a part of his kingdom. The kingdom of God was quite literally in his hand.

This is Jesus' first sermon. This is what he comes out of the gate preaching to the people of Galilee. And this continued to be the core of his preaching for the next three years. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe.

How was this sermon received? Well, that's kind of a mixed bag. Because this was not at all what the people were expecting the Messiah to preach to them. They were expecting the Messiah to get rid of the political oppression of foreign occupation. They were expecting that there would be no more poverty, famine, or hunger. They were expecting a place that would be safe and protected, where animals and children could play together without fear, like the prophet Isaiah had talked about. They were expecting that sin would be destroyed, the enemies of God would be struck down, and everyone would worship the Lord.

But Jesus turns those expectations upside down. They had the prophecies right, but Jesus went about fulfilling them in a completely unexpected way. Jesus doesn't lead a powerful army. As we read in the following verses, he leads fishermen. Jesus doesn't hand out money and the best houses to those who believe in him. No, he simply calls them to follow him. And then leads them into a life of humility and sacrifice.

He doesn't wield overwhelming power and might, but is arrested and crucified. He doesn't destroy the sin of this world, nor does he strike down sinners. No, he forgives our sin and he shows mercy to sinners. To those who looked upon Jesus as he hung dying on a cross, it didn't seem like he had fulfilled any prophecies at all.

He had. More than they realized. And he still will. The day will come when all their original expectations will come true. At the end of time, Jesus will return in power and glory. Children will safely play with dangerous animals. Sin will be destroyed, and we will hunger no more.

But now comes the hard part: what this does in our lives. Because, just like those first people who heard him, Jesus is calling us to make a U-turn. He's calling us to head in the opposite direction from where we want to go.

Start with something as simple as what you do when you do something wrong. Now the direction most people go when they've messed up is to avoid taking responsibility. They blame someone else. They say they were only doing what everyone was doing. They say it really wasn't that bad. They call it a lifestyle choice. Their parents are at fault. It's in the genes, and so they were predisposed to be this way. They were only acting in justified anger. Etc, etc...

Jesus calls for us to repent. He says take responsibility for what you've done wrong. He says confess it to him and to each other. He says don't make excuses like the rest of the crowd, but come before him with repentant hearts and seek his forgiveness. So the confession of sins at the beginning of the service is not just a part of the liturgy we do each week. It's actually turning away from the sin in our lives and turning toward Jesus. To hear the good news that he forgives.

Of course, confessing our sins means changing direction in very real, often uncomfortable ways. To repent is to turn away from anything that leads away from Jesus. And that is different for every person.

Perhaps you've just recently been looking at your credit card bills from all the things you bought over Christmas. And realizing that greed and covetousness have taken hold in your life. Repent and believe.

Perhaps you're struggling with a sexual sin, like what discussed in the Epistle last week. Pornography, adultery, vulgarity, a failure to lead a chaste and decent life. Repent and believe.

Perhaps you're filled with anger and bitterness. Anger against friends and family for how they've wronged you. Anger against your neighbors and your country for the results of the election or the actions of our leaders. That anger is sinful. It is foothold for the devil, St Paul tells us. Repent and believe.

Perhaps... there's something else. I couldn't possibly name every single sin you could be dealing with right now. The human heart is a corrupt thing. And there's no end to the evil it can come up with. And you know I'm right because you've felt the evil that has welled up inside of you too.

To those first people who heard Jesus preach, he says, "Repent and believe." To us who hear these words today, he also says, "Repent and believe." Why? Because the kingdom of God is at hand.

It's at hand in this very room. In the preaching of the Word. In the administration of the Sacrament. Jesus is here. He is at hand. And so his kingdom is at hand.

And if you have trouble believing that, that's why I'm here. In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ. An undershepherd to stand in the Good Shepherd's place. And say to you with his voice, "Repent and believe."

Believe that when I say, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit," that I speak with his voice. That I speak his good news to you.

And if you need it to be even closer at hand. If you need to actually feel me lay my hand on your head, touching you like Jesus touched so many, then come into my office some time and I'll say it to you one-on-one. Whatever it takes for you to repent and believe.

Because that is the life of one of Jesus' disciples. He calls to us in the waters of Holy Baptism: follow me. He proclaims the Gospel of God to us: repent and believe. And then he sends us out as fishers of men, to make disciples of all nations. Baptizing them and proclaiming the Gospel to them. Calling them to repent and believe. So that they may know that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand for them too.