

## **Never Too Late to Join in God's Song of Good News**

### **Mark 1:14-20**

It's good to see you, my Asbury family, in person in 2024. I hope everything goes well with your life so far. But we also know that there will be ups and downs this year just like there were last year. On the first Sunday of the new year, we had a snowstorm, so we had online worship. Zion KUMC also had an online worship service. After finishing the Zion worship service, I relaxed to enjoy a beautiful New England snowy day. But that didn't last long. I checked the smart thermostats in the Zion building and one of the thermostats indicated that the room temperature was lower than its setting. This meant that the boiler wasn't working so I rushed to the church through the heavy snow. I changed the battery of the thermostat and turned the boiler off and on as well as the relay switch. But I couldn't fix it. Do you know the best way to fix this issue? Call Carl Bishop Jr.! Carl knows almost everything! Of course, I didn't want to bother Carl, so I called the electrician who resolved the relay problem in the boiler room before the bitter cold arrived

We seek for a solution when we have a problem. Problem-solution thinking is a kind of default thinking for many of us. When we see the church declining, we often use this problem-solution method. We try to identify the reasons why people do not come to church and come up with some solutions like changing worship style or adopting a mission strategy. These are not bad things, but sometimes, a preoccupation with problem-solution thinking hinders us from realizing what we really need. When we have a problem, what we first need to seek is not a solution, but God. In the Old Testament, the kings of Israel often sought a military alliance with other nations as a solution to consolidate their regime. However, God sent prophets to call Israel back to God. Prophet Hosea said, "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for your sins have brought you down." Maybe what we need the most is not a practical solution to our problem but returning to the Lord, our God.

### **Jesus proclaiming the good news of God**

This is what Jesus proclaimed when he began his ministry at Galilee. He proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; REPENT!, and believe in the good news." To repent means to turn around. Turn around from sin. Turn around from false belief. Turn around from destructive habits of mind and body. Repentance means first admitting we are wrong and thus it includes the realization that something is not right in us. When we realize that we have done something wrong to someone, we should say, "I am sorry." The church word for this is confession of sin. But in addition to this, true repentance includes a renewed commitment to a better way. It means that we turn away from sin and toward God. We leave the old way and move to a new way of life. Without repentance, our spiritual journey often ends up with wearing another mask that hides our broken and sinful selves and does not lead us to true transformation.

About a week before Christmas, I realized that my car was covered with dirt and its white color had turned almost gray. Since Christmas was approaching, I decided to give my car a nice car wash and took it to automatic car-wash. Normally, I opt for the cheapest option, but Christmas was coming so I chose the most expensive option. Sitting in my car while the machine moved back and forth, washing the car made me feel good! After the car-wash was done, I drove back to the house. I was shocked when I got out because the car was still covered with dirt. Do you know why? The expensive car wash included a glass coating. What happened was that before the dirt was thoroughly washed away, the glass coating was applied over the dirt. I rubbed

the surface but couldn't remove the dirt. If you see my car, please don't assume that your pastor is unsanitary! What I would like to say is this. Without true repentance, we are prone to misuse our religious practices to mask ourselves so that other people can see us as good people, but there is no freedom in this kind of faith life. We need to take off our masks.

[ppt] Please see the two pictures on the screen. Can you guess who this man is? St. Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles. He is also known as Nathaniel. In the gospel of John, Jesus said of Nathanael, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." What is unique about his statue and his image in the painting "The Last Judgment" by Michelangelo, is his flayed skin. According to church tradition, he was martyred during a mission trip to Armenia, where he was skinned alive and beheaded. A scholar interpreted Bartholomew's appearance as a symbol of a sincere man whose innermost self lay bare before God. He stands before God, revealing what lies under his skin, the true essence of his being.

We often wear masks before other people and even before God, but the more we pretend to be who we are not, the more we suffer from the unbearable weight of the mask we wear. Repentance helps us to tear aside the facade of hypocrisy and stand before God as we are. We know that God loves us whoever we are and no matter what. This is the good news and the starting point for a new life. Do you believe this good news? Amen.

### **Believe in the good news!**

Jesus said, "REPENT!, and believe in the good news." Repentance is turning around from sin and toward God. To move toward God, we need to believe in the good news. Unfortunately, we are inclined to believe bad news rather than good news. Some have said, "the human brain is predisposed towards focusing on negative information." Attending to negative information is advantageous for survival. However, when our lives and society are driven by bad news and fear for survival, human civilization will eventually end up with self-destruction.

I believe you have heard of the Doomsday Clock. Each year, scientists announced how we are close to the risk of a global catastrophe such as nuclear war. In 2023, the doomsday clock indicated that it was 90 seconds to midnight and I bet the clock will be closer to midnight this year. Why are we getting close to midnight despite of all those marvelous technological advancements and intellectual achievements? Because we believe bad news rather than good news. I believe most of you lived through the cold war era. The Soviet Union and the United States were in a "military arms race" and created tens of thousands of nuclear warheads. Why? because we were afraid of each other so we wanted to have a stronger army than our enemy. Ironically, that dramatically increased the dangerous possibility of human extinctions.

Then, imagine what would happen if everyone believed in good news rather than bad news. What would happen if everyone in the world believed we are all children of God and one family? What would happen if everyone believed in the goodness of other human beings? What about believing that everyone is created in the sacred image of God? What would happen if everyone believed that forgiveness and reconciliation is the way of salvation rather than vengeance and hatred? The world would be a much better place than the world today. I know that this sounds like an overly utopian idea. We, Christians, believe in the coming kingdom of God or at least we confess "thy kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer every Sunday morning. We live with and live for this vision of the coming Kingdom of God in which God's rule of love is fully realized and no one is discriminated against due to their skin color, physical appearance, gender, sexual orientation and so forth. There is no thirst or hunger but everyone enjoys and shares the

bounty of God's table. But, isn't the coming kingdom of God an "overly utopian idea?" We, Christians, believe this good news and live for it. Believe in the good news rather than bad news.

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Jesus began his ministry with proclaiming, "REPENT!, and believe in the good news." But he didn't want to do this ministry alone so he invited other to join him. He called Simon, Andrew, James and John and they joined Jesus' ministry. When I read this scripture, I don't know why but the Asbury choir came to my mind. The Asbury choir sings many songs with different musical styles. Sometimes, Samantha does a solo part and other members joined the song or respond to it, call and response and this creates beautiful music. In the scripture, Jesus began to sing God's song of good news and Simon, Andres, James and John responded to his call. This song of Good news has reached out to us and in some sense, we are all singing this wonderful song. Are you singing God's song of Good news? If you haven't joined the song, it is never too late to join in God's song of good news. You can even join the Asbury choir too!

My friends, we hear so much bad news each day, but believe in the good news that God loves us so much. Believe in the Good news that God's Kin-dome is near and God will wipe away all tears and heal all brokenness. Believe in the good news that loving people including our enemies is the way of true salvation. Believe in the good news and let us sing God's song of Good news together. Amen.