



Sermon, January 14, 2018
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

“Bigger Mind”

Scripture: Mark 1:1-11

1:1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Opening: New Year, New Start

Here it is January 14th. It is hard to believe that we are already two weeks into this new year. How many of you have already broken any New Year’s Resolutions? How many of you resolved a long time ago not to make New Year’s resolutions? I’m with you. I’m terrible at keeping resolutions. I’ve heard that at the beginning of every new year, fitness centers get a huge number of sign-ups, but by the end of January, they are back down to their regular patrons. We seem to be much more proficient at making resolutions than we are at keeping them.

Nonetheless, the idea of making a new start in life is compelling. Think of the various roads in life that you’ve taken that just ended up nowhere. I have a friend who says that a dead end is just another place to turn

around. You know, the Bible doesn't condemn dead-ends. It just says, "Turn around!"

The path of Jesus begins with turning around. In the Bible, the word for this is "repent." Let's look at what John the Baptizer had to say about it. Mark reads, "a baptism of repentance." It doesn't say, "John was baptizing after the people repented." It was a baptism of repentance. Let's pause a moment and look at that word, "baptism."

The original Greek word, *baptisma*, means to immerse. It has the same sense and uses of the English word, immerse. For instance, have you ever immersed yourself in a good book? You were baptizing yourself in a that book. It doesn't mean "to dunk somebody in water." It simply means to immerse. But, I do have to say, there is something powerfully dramatic about being immersed in water. I remember when I was young, my mom taking us to swimming lessons. But I could just never get the hang of things. I didn't like putting my head in the water, and the whole stroke, turn your head, take a breath, stroke thing just wasn't going to happen. Several summers went by like this. Then finally, one summer at Boy Scout camp, we were at Warm Lake in Idaho, and I was taking swimming lessons along the lakeshore. I finally plunged myself in the water and glided along the bottom for about three seconds. But it was amazing! I felt the power of the water all around me, I felt like a fish, and suddenly the whole swimming mystery was solved. Total immersion in the experience changed everything.

This is what John is talking about. New life doesn't happen by just wishing for it. You have to jump in, full-bodied.

John is talking about a life immersed in the power and presence of God. Water immersion symbolizes this. Jesus will come to immerse them in the power of the Spirit. John is all about preparing for this immersion in the Spirit. We have to prepare ourselves for this. How? By *telling the truth* about our lives – confessing our sins – and how off the mark we are, how off-path we have wandered, how lost and confused, how injured and hurt, how self-centered and hurtful we are. John preaches a baptism of

repentance – an immersion in this self-examination, telling the truth, and starting over.

Now we need to pause once again and look at the next word, “repentance.” The original Greek is *metanoia*, which literally means to change one’s mind, to change the direction of one’s mind, and thus one’s life. In fact, *metanoia* also translates as “beyond the (normal) mind,” and the force of the verb indicates going beyond our normal consciousness or way of thinking into a deeper, bigger mind, the mind of Christ is what Paul calls it in Philippians. *Metanoia*, or repentance, then, means redirecting our lives from our small self-centered minds into the bigger mind of God. John preached about immersing oneself in repentance, or *metanoia*.

John says Jesus will come to immerse us in the power of the Holy Spirit. So, Jesus come down the River Jordan to meet John. If you are like me, you probably ask, “Why did Jesus have to repent?” But remember, *metanoia* means to move into a bigger mind in order to start over, and Jesus comes to symbolically demonstrate that he embraces this bigger mind of God. In essence, he is embracing his divine nature, and his divine mission to show us a path to God. And what happens next blows everything away, and people listening to this story in Mark’s time would have been blown away.

Jesus goes down in the water to show the world that he is ready embrace the bigger mind of God. He wades in the water with John. And then listen to Mark’s words: “...just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” Torn apart. There are two places in Mark where the Greek word is used that means torn apart (*schizomenous*): here and in Mark 15:38. Please turn with me in your Bibles to Mark 15. This is the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. He cries out, someone runs up to give him vinegar on a sponge, and, then verse 37 and 38: “Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”

Now this curtain is highly significant. This was the outer curtain veiling the innermost part of the Holy of Holies, the place where God's presence resided. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, this outer veil was a gigantic curtain 80 feet high. It was, he says, a "Babylonian tapestry, with embroidery of blue and fine linen, of scarlet also and purple, wrought with marvelous skill. Nor was this mixture of materials without its mystic meaning: it typified the universe...."

Then Josephus tells us what was pictured on this curtain:

"Portrayed on this tapestry was a *panorama of the entire heavens....* [7] [emphasis mine]."

In other words, the outer veil of the Jerusalem temple was actually one huge image of the starry sky! Thus, upon encountering Mark's statement that "the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom," any of his readers who had ever seen the temple or heard it described would instantly have seen in their mind's eye an image of *the heavens being torn*, and would immediately have been reminded of Mark's earlier description of the heavens being torn at the baptism. (David Ulansey, "The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark's Cosmic 'Inclusio,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110:1 (Spring 1991) pp. 123-25).

This is what happened to Jesus and what he came to do: open heaven to us. Not after death, but now. The path of Jesus is nothing less than a path into a bigger mind, an expanded consciousness, the metanoia John preaches. Our minds literally have to be changed. But this is no easy task. Anyone trying to escape the clutches of addiction or trying to heal from an abusive upbringing, or recover from PTSD knows that "changing one's mind" is not like changing the sheets or changing one's clothes. It actually entails changing the very quality and content of one's mind, and changing the configuration of the neurons in the brain. It involves developing a new mode of thinking and perceiving the world. It involves literally an expansion of consciousness. Paul called it having the mind of Christ, Jesus called it the Kingdom or Realm of Heaven (or God) that is within us and in our midst. This is what Jesus came to help humanity realize and develop into. But there are a lot of things that have to be deconstructed, taken apart, disassembled, in order to be rebuilt and

reconfigured in our mental landscape. This is the work of the Spirit within us. And that is what Jesus immerses us in – the power of the Holy Spirit. And this transforms us. It transforms our direction in life, it transforms our focus in life, it transforms the world around us by the things we do, and it transforms our very reality.

In the 65th chapter of Isaiah, God says, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” Jesus saw those heavens torn open, and felt the holy power of those heavens poured out upon him. And he pours out the same Holy Spirit power upon you. Every one of you. We can all start over. No dead ends. Just new life.