



Risking Being Relevant

Repent and believe the good news.

That's today's talk in a sentence.

The title I've given this talk is "Risking Being Relevant."

So, now that you gotten the talk in a sentence and the title of it if you want to doze off, feel free to do so. Somebody will poke you in the ribs - when it's time to get the money.

The phrase - repent and believe the good news - is one that the writer of the book of Mark attributes to Jesus at the beginning of Mark's telling of his version of the Jesus story.

The words "repent" and "believe" have meanings for both Jesus and his followers that are very different from what these words have come to mean for us.

The word "repent" means two things.

First, it has the meaning of "to return." In the understanding of the Jewish mind at the time, and we have to continue to keep in mind that Jesus was a Jew, to repent meant something like "return from exile and

bondage, from darkness and death, and come back to freedom, light and life."

To repent also meant to "go beyond the mind that you currently have."

Repentance in its true meaning is much more than we usually think and is not something done once and for all but, rather, is an ongoing process.

To "believe" for most people has come to mean "to think that a certain set of statements are true." For people at the time of Jesus belief had much more to do with trust and commitment.

I am coming more and more to believe for us to repent and believe in these meanings of the words are among the most difficult things we can do.

There are a multitude of reasons this is true.

One reason is that seeing "what is" is much more difficult, as well as inconvenient and uncomfortable, than we usually think. My first, perhaps most significant spiritual teacher, taught that enlightenment is nothing more or less than seeing things as they are rather than as we wish them to be or believe them to be.

I'm going to give you five seconds to look at a picture and tell me what is wrong with it. (You will have to download the presentation slides to see this optical illusion.)

Over and over you have heard me say that the central truth of and for spiritual practice is "paying attention" and developing the resources to be present

to "what is." We easily and quickly assume that we do see.

(Also, central to this practice is growing in the capacity to be non-judgmental.)

One of the things that gets in the way of our seeing is that the culture in which we live is so distracting and competitive.

Here is the picture again. The people who developed this illusion say that the mirror in the picture distracts us from accurately seeing the sign. It does not say "do not enter" but, rather, "not do enter."

Another reason repenting and believing in the biblical sense is so difficult is because of the fact that we live in a world of such conflicting messages.

One of the publications I enjoy is "The Week." After Christmas I sat down with the issue dated December 31. The cover said what the issue would be about: The Faces of 2013. In case you are not familiar with it, The Week has a very interesting business model. It has no reporters as such. Rather a staff of people scour news sources from around the world and report on them. They brag that they reflect "the best of the U.S. and International Media."

This particular issue had two pages devoted to "Health and Science." One page was about "some of the things in 2013 they said were good for us."

One of these things is Tylenol. Here is the story:

"Tylenol can help calm existential dread. To get volunteers to mull their inevitable death, researchers at the University of British Columbia had them watch

scenes from the disturbing David Lynch film ' rabbits' or write about what they thought would happen to their bodies when they died. Those who were given Tylenol beforehand were significantly less upset by such depressing activities than those given a placebo. The medicine's main ingredient, acetaminophen, seems to ease angst, says study author Daniel Randles, because 'a similar neurological process is responsible' for physical pain and emotional distress."

There you go. If you are anxious about death, and who isn't, just take Tylenol.

Then on the very next and facing page there was a listing of some of the things we were told to avoid in 2013. You guessed it. One of them was Tylenol. Here is some of the article:

"Tylenol can send you to the hospital. An investigative report found that its active ingredient, acetaminophen, is the country's leading cause of acute liver failure. Some 78,000 Americans visit the ER each year following an overdose, and roughly 150 Americans die from it." And, according to the article, it doesn't take much to do it. Exceeding recommended dosage by as few as two tablets can do it.

So, if you are anxious about dying take Tylenol and take control of the issue.

Another huge block to our being able to repent and believe the good news about the way to freedom and love is the huge amount of fear in which we live.

This past Fall, just before Halloween actually, we watched a program we had recorded from PBS about the 75th anniversary of a radio program that was broadcast on October 30, 1938. The program was written, produced

and acted by a brilliant Orson Wells. The program was called "The War of the Worlds." I imagine most of you know about it. It was an enactment as a radio drama of H.G. Wells' story with Martians landing in Grover's Mill, New Jersey and working their way toward New York City, releasing poison gas as they went. (By the way, Orson Wells was a very good and accomplished magician.)

By the end of the program the switchboard at CBS was ablaze with calls. Phone lines to police stations were jammed. People around the country were panicking. Newspaper headlines the next day said things like: "Radio Station's 'Attack By Mars' Panics Thousands" and "Many Flee Homes to Escape 'Gas Raids from Mars.'"

It is tempting for us today to feel superior to these people. We are smart enough to know that people couldn't travel from Mars in that short of a time.

This story and its aftermath has been studied by many different research groups. It has been found that people who failed to "fact check" - you know, change stations or look up the description of the show in the paper, were more likely to panic than those who did. Less educated people fell for it. As did, sadly, religious people who felt that this was the apocalypse, an act of God.

While I doubt that something like the panic caused by that radio program could happen in our time, we do live in a culture where we are being affected by something slower but similiar. We are regularly lied to by our politicians and leaders all the time - people on both sides of the political spectrum. Watch Fox News for a while. Then, switch over and watch MSNBC. I wonder how many people still believe that the Affordable Care Act will mandate death panels to kill your grandmother, or that you can't get pregnant from legitimate rape, or

that people choose their sexual orientation, or that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11.

As one story I read about the radio broadcast said, "So before we look back at 1938 with a smug sense of superiority and imagine that people today would never fall for a deliberately staged set of fictions, we need to appreciate that it's just the delivery that's different; not a one-shot blast of misinformation and panic, but a steady drip, drip, drip of corrosion much more damaging than anything produced by the Mercury Theatre in 1938."

Another reason repenting and believing the "good news" is so difficult for us - and I'm sure we could come up with many other reasons - is that we so like to be in control and we are so affected by the culture in which we live. One of the books I've been reading as part of my daily spiritual practice is "Jesus The Teacher Within" by Lawrence Freeman.

In Mark's telling of the Jesus story he has Jesus ask his disciples what people were saying about him. They answer and Jesus responds, "But, what about you? Who do you say that I am."

No respected Jesus scholar thinks Jesus himself asked this. Jesus rarely initiates dialogue or refers to himself in the first person. This is a teaching question of the early followers and it is still an instructive question for us.

Though I personally believe that if we choose to hear this question and respond to it, we are on the path of transformation it is not an easy question to answer. I say "path of transformation" because the question causes us to learn about ourselves and self-knowledge brings transformation.

Likely every culture has its own images of Jesus. In addition to this, no answer we give to this question can ever be final. In most of the art galleries I've visited around the world, Jesus looks amazingly like the culture in which the artist lived.

A woman named Miriam Amanda Wallace Ferguson was the 32nd governor of Texas. She was known as "Ma Ferguson." There is a story that she opposed bilingual education and once said, "If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it ought to be good enough for the children of Texas." The point of the story is that our thinking about Jesus is inevitably culturally conditioned.

We can only imagine Jesus with the means provided by our cultural and personal imagination. I am not a biblical scholar with deep knowledge of either Judaism or the cultural norms of the Middle East two centuries ago. I know people who are and I openly rely on their work.

By the way there is a huge difference between being a scholar of the bible and biblical scholarship. Being a scholar of the Bible is what allows one to use the Bible in anyway one wants to. Usually to prove one's own point of view.

A lot of organized religion fits into this category as it has developed to satisfy individual ego needs of worthiness and significance. There is no better way for the ego to stay in control than to use God for cover. When people do use religion or God to hide behind to push their own agenda, they can't see their own shadow at work. The work that the shadow does is always some kind of violence - communally (this is what all church fights are about) or individually (I'm in and you are out.) So much of the warring violence in this world has

used religion or God to hide behind. Rene Girard calls it "sacred violence."

Biblical scholarship is about doing our best to see what the biblical story really says. This is hard. More about this in a moment.

I do know that it is tempting, and I see evidence of this all the time, once a culture has imagined Jesus to enroll him in support of our opinions and prejudices.

I have a set of Peanuts cartoons. Lucy is talking to Linus. She says, "America should get back to biblical Christian principles!"

He says, "So we should feed and shelter the poor?" "No, I'm not paying for a lazy person."

"We should visit and comfort prisoners?" "No, they don't deserve that."

"We should pay our taxes without complaining?" "No, that's MY money and I want it."

"We should show love and mercy freely?" "No, that has to be earned."

"We should avoid violence?" "No, we have to take out the 'bad guys.'"

"We should be gracious to foreigners?" "No, they shouldn't be here."

"We should seek to end social injustice throughout the world?" "No, that's not our problem."

"Then what principles are you talking about?" "Opposing gay marriage."

The Jesus we call to our imaginations today in our clearly post-modern and, for most people, post-Christian world is very different from the Galilean Jew of peasant class who was born when the emperor Augustus ruled in Rome and was crucified by order of Pontius Pilate on a small hill near an abandoned quarry outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Christianity has been the world's largest and materially most successful religion and over the ages has developed numerous images to describe who Jesus is and what he means. There is no question that many who have called themselves Christian over the years have been more concerned with promoting their understanding of Jesus in support of their moral or social opinion than in discovering who he really is.

As you are likely aware - unless this is your first time to attend Ordinary Life and if it is, not only are you welcome here but also I hope you find here resources that are useful for your spiritual journey - I have been in my teaching not only offering teachings that will, hopefully, be useful for psychological and spiritual growth but also I want to contribute to religious and spiritual literacy.

Though I have a doctorate in theology, I'm learning new stuff about Jesus and the Jesus story all the time. I am not only profoundly disturbed by much that is passing itself off as Christianity today but also am constantly stunned when I hear people say with such confidence that not only are they "Christian" but also here are the things that you have to do or believe to be a Christian. Usually it means believing their doctrinal statements. Whenever I hear someone say that they are Christian, I want to say, "Already?!? Amazing. I'm still working at it."

I have been using as a guide to write the "life talks" I've offered in here one version of the Jesus story. This one as edited by Robert Funk, "The Gospel of Jesus." We had, right before Christmas, gotten to the part of the story where Jesus is arrested and, then, executed. We didn't deal with this story over the Advent/Christmas season and given that time and the last two weeks of not teaching I've had time to think about where to go from here. My plan is to resume the story and to supplement it by an outline provided by a book co-authored by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, "The Last Week."

As we go through the weeks ahead, I hope that you will remember things, critical matters actually, that we've talked about in these times over the last many months. Jesus scholarship focuses on the things the historical Jesus actually said and did to the best of scholarship's ability to reconstruct it. The stories that are told, especially those about the birth and the death of Jesus, are stories that were constructed by the early followers of Jesus for both teaching and liturgical purposes. They are not news accounts.

My focus is going to be on two things primarily. First, what is the story and what is the story about? Second, what does this story have to do with us? What is its meaning and its relevancy?

I went to hear the last public talk Jim Bankston, former senior minister here at St. Paul's, gave before his retirement. He gave it to a group of several hundred people at a dinner sponsored by The Breaking the Silence organization. This group has been concerned about matters of justice and full inclusion for gays and lesbians in the United Methodist Church. Jim Bankston was instrumental in the forming of this

organization and has over the years taken a stand of integrity on this matter that cost him dearly.

At the meeting I am referring to Jim said that the church sadly had lost its ability to be prophetic on this issue. Indeed, many churches as we speak are involved in contentious battles with some group waging what I consider to be a rearguard action on this matter. The leaders of these groups do not see that similar battles were fought in the church over the issues of slavery, whether divorced people could serve in places of leadership in the church and the role of women in ministry. It is true. The church is not and, again sadly, perhaps cannot afford to be prophetic about much of anything.

Why? Because, to take the teaching of Jesus would affect economic distributive justice. We'll be dealing with this more today and more later on. I am personally convinced that one of the reasons biblical scholarship did not make it from the places of exciting discoveries and profound learning back in the 1940's and 50's is because people were afraid how those with money would react to new truths and insights that messed with their current way of understanding things.

Then Jim added that the question remained whether the church could remain relevant.

I've got another series of cartoons that so fits here. Jesus is giving a test to one of his followers.

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Great! On to Question #2. Based on biblical teaching, do you accept the following as fact:

Talking snakes?

Yes, Genesis 3:1.

Talking donkeys?

Numbers 22:28

Gods that impregnate humans?

Of course!

Unicorns?

Numbers 23:22.

Dragons?

For sure! Deuteronomy, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Malachi all speak of dragons.

What about suicidal, demon possessed, cliff jumping pigs?

So it is written in Mark 5:13, so I believe.

And finally, did you do as I commanded and sell each and every one of your possessions and give all your money to the poor?

Well, I . . . wait, do what now?

Un, Yeah. Luke 14:26-33 and Luke 18:18-22! I said it twice for Pete's sake! You have to sell everything you own to be able to inherit eternal life!

Seriously, I thought that was metaphorical.

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The issue now is can the church in any way that really matters remain relevant? Let's use the story of the last week of Jesus life as a lens to look through as we seek to answer this question of relevancy and, perhaps, gain some insight into why the prophetic voice has been lost.

Almost exactly ten years ago Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ" was released. That movie stirred

up a lot of controversy. The fact that it made headline news for weeks is testimony to the power this story has, even after 2,000 years.

Gibson took as literal the story found mostly in Mark. Some people were delighted with the film. Some saw it as a potentially powerful evangelistic tool because it graphically showed how much suffering Jesus experienced "for us." Others were greatly disturbed by the film not only because it wrongly showed the Jews to be responsible for the death of Jesus but also by the message that we were all somehow responsible for the death of Jesus. Jesus had to experience all of this horror because of us.

Indeed, the title of the movie, "The Passion of the Christ," focuses on the physical suffering of Jesus. Here the word "passion" comes from the Latin word that means "suffering."

In our ordinary usage the word "passion" means something we care about deeply. Our passion is what we are passionate about.

What was Jesus passionate about?

What Jesus was passionate about was what he referred to as "the rule of God."

What did Jesus mean by "the rule of God"?

It wasn't, as the vast majority of people who call themselves "Christians" believe, about life after death. What Jesus meant by "the rule of God" is pure and simple justice for all, a fair share of a world that belongs, not to us but, to God.

Most everyone, whether they go to church or not, has heard the phrase: "It will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Again, most people think about "heaven" off out there somewhere, sometime. Think about it, rather, as how difficult it is for a wealthy person to enter the world of justice.

I was found by this wonderful cartoon from the New Yorker where two obviously wealthy old white guys are enjoying the fruits of their labors and one is saying to the other, "We need either bigger needles or smaller camels." Another instance of our need to control.

This passion for justice is what led to the unjust act of Jesus being executed. As Borg and Crossan say, "Before Jesus, after Jesus, and, for Christians, archetypically in Jesus, those who live for nonviolent justice die all too often from violent injustice."

So in the weeks ahead I'm going to focus on what it was that Jesus was passionate about that led to his execution and I want also to focus on how this might be relevant for us. If we were to focus only on the arrest, trial, torture and crucifixion; that would be to ignore the connection between his life and death.

The writings we have in the Christian Scriptures are a combination of many things. For one thing, they are not "eye-witness news" reports. They are a combination of history remembered and, even more, history interpreted. In my own study I have come more and more to believe that the stories of both the birth and, especially, the death of Jesus are for instruction and liturgical use by the early followers of "the way."

Whoever wrote what we call the "Gospel of Mark" constructs the last week of the life of Jesus on a day-

by-day basis. This lets us know it is liturgical. The Jewish people were very big on liturgical celebrations. The liturgy of the remembered story of the exodus and passover, both huge Jewish celebrations, will figure prominently in the telling of the last week of Jesus' life - what Christians have come to call "Holy Week."

This is not an easy story. I think it is a story that most people think they know but which they don't at all.

Let me, then, conclude today with where we will begin next week.

The Bible is a collection of writings written by people from the bottom to people on the bottom. If you want to conduct your own biblical study, read the Gospel of Mark. It is brief and you can do it one sitting. Use Eugene Peterson's translation. It's readable. See in the telling of the story who were the people Jesus could heal, forgive and transform. Those on the bottom or the top? See who were the people who most questioned and opposed him. Those on the bottom or the top?

What we call Holy Week begins with what we call the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus is riding on a donkey into Jerusalem for a showdown with the temple authorities - who, incidentally, are not bad people. We don't, of course, have any photographs of this procession. There is not a lot of really early Christian art. I searched and searched for some early depiction of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Everything is after 313 and reflects the already reaching of the church to be powerful and in control.

Actually, Jesus entry into Jerusalem was one of two parades that day.

Jesus and his followers entering from the East and a more powerful, much more powerful, contingent entering from the West. Jesus from the peasant village of Nazareth and whose followers were peasants rode on a donkey.

At the other end of the city, from the West, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers.

Jesus procession proclaimed the kingdom of God. Pilate's proclaimed the power of the empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's execution.

More, the story calls us, invites us to see which of the two processions we are in and support. By being part of which will we truly be relevant and, who knows, perhaps even prophetic?

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.