

This sermon was not preached as I preached extemporaneously during the service. So, this is my "official" sermon, but not the transcript of what you can hear in the video.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." These are the first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, just after 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. Mark is always very direct and goes to the point. In Mark's account of the temptation in the wilderness there are no words, no dialogue between Jesus and the tempter as in other Gospels. Mark just let us know that there, in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted, that he was among wild beasts and that angels took care of him. A way to tell us that the devil had no power over Him, because He is the Son of God, as the voice heard at Jesus baptism made it clear.

The time is fulfilled, meaning, now is the time of salvation. The time is fulfilled, it is why Jesus saw the heavens torn apart. The time is fulfilled, something new is happening, God, in Jesus, opens a new future for the whole creation. God is intervening in the world, reaching out to his children he loves too much to abandon them.

The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near, a new way of living is at hand if only we are willing to follow God's command to love God and to love our neighbor. But we know that we, human beings, have the tendency to think we can do whatever we want. We have this tendency to think that we don't need God to tell us what to do and what not to do. The Bible is so clear that we are called to love as God loves us, that we are called to do justice, to stand up for the poor and the oppress, that we are called to forgive as we are forgiven, that we are called to love our neighbor. However when we look at our world, when we look at our society, we know that this is not the case. There are so many injustices all around us, so many people living under poverty level, so many people suffering from harassment, racism, oppression, poverty, homelessness... And somehow we are part of the problem when we are not able to put love, unconditional love, demanding love, at the heart of our lives. The time is fulfilled, God is about to act, God is waiting for us, so Jesus tells us one more time: Repent and believe in the Good news

On Wednesday morning I had the privilege to impose ashes on some people for whom the ashes are a physical sign of their spiritual desire to enter Lent. At first I gave them the choice between the traditional words of the BCP *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return* taken from Genesis 3:19, or the words from Jesus we heard in the Gospel: *Repent and believe in the Good News*. I know that many people love the traditional *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*. But is Ash Wednesday and Lent about death? Is Lent about remembering that we are mortal? Maybe from time to time we need to be reminded that we are mortals, but truth be told, as we age we are well aware that some day we will die. And in the midst of this Covid-19 pandemic, we have heard a lot about death. So, after having imposed the ashes on a couple of people, I made up my mind, and used both the words of Genesis and the words of Jesus, *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return, so repent and believe in the Good News*. Because Lent is about repentance in order for us to follow Jesus more sincerely.

Lent is about repentance, because we all have done things, said words, written emails or comments on social media, been silent in face of injustice or prejudice, we even might have had thoughts that were not very charitable... We need to acknowledge our shortcomings, our failures, or to use a theological term, we need to recognize our sin. It is not an invitation to dwell on our problems and to feel guilty. Rather this is an invitation to look at our lives through the eyes of God, who loves us unconditionally and wants us to love God and our neighbor in return. This is an invitation to take the time to look at what keeps us away from our Lord in order to change what we can, and in order to feel the presence and the love of God in our lives.

Repent, and believe in the Good News. The Good News is the message proclaimed by Jesus; the Good News is that we are loved by God. The Good News is that the Kingdom of God has come near. The Good News is that we have been saved by a loving God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Lent is not about mortality, it is about life, abundant life, given in the death and resurrection of Jesus. A life that is offered to all. A life that we have been experiencing since our baptism when we became beloved children of God. So Lent is an invitation to follow Jesus more closely, to listen more attentively to the Good News expressed in the Gospels. Lent is an invitation to put our acts, our lives, in accordance with our faith, in accordance to the message of Christ.

Repent and believe in the Good News. We live in a society where it is so easy to forget God! We live in a world where we are seduced by so many things, so many different and opposite voices, that if we don't pay attention we drift away from Christ and Christ's teaching slowly but surely. To repent and to believe in the Good News, is a way to put aside all the voices that are not God's, to reject the behaviors that are not in line with the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus. The Greek word *Metanoia*, translated by repent, means a change of mind, a conversion. When we repent, we are not just sorry for the things we have done or not done, rather we change the orientation of our hearts. We leave the actions or thoughts or behaviors that were not inspired by the message of Jesus, and we turn our hearts, our minds, our lives to Christ. When we repent, we consciously and resolutely choose to turn to Christ, to believe in Him, and to follow Him with the best of our abilities.

Maybe this Lenten season is an invitation to ask ourselves, daily, before doing anything, the famous question: *What would Jesus do?* For example if I have a grudge against someone or a group of people, should I dwell in that grudge, should I cultivate my resentfulness? Or should I ask myself what would Jesus do? We know the uncomfortable and demanding answer: ask for forgiveness, grant forgiveness, seek reconciliation. When we forgive those who have offended us, those who sinned against us, we free them and we free ourselves too.

When we repent and strive to follow Christ more closely, one reality becomes clear and powerful in our lives: love. Love of God, and love of our neighbor. Strong, concrete, and unconditional love. And this is not easy. Again and again we have to try. Again and again we have to fight against our human tendencies, or against the voices of the world. Again and again we have to fight what we call temptations: those voices and attractions which want us to follow other ways than the way of Jesus, the way of love. It is why, again and again we are invited by Jesus to repent and to believe in His Good News of love and reconciliation.

As your pastor, I invite you during this Lenten season to take the time to pray and meditate with the Litany of Penitence, found on page 267 in the BCP. This will help you to look at your lives and to identify the ways you might have gone astray from Jesus' teachings, and, of course, it will help you to repent and follow Christ more closely again.

If you were on social media these last days, you might have seen lots of posts about Lent and about fasting. Many people are sharing what they gave up for Lent, or what new discipline they will add to their lives in order to live a Holy Lent. Good for them! For me, I want to take seriously the words of Jesus heard during the Ash Wednesday service: give in secret, fast in secret, pray in secret. Lent is not about showing off, it is about walking humbly before our God and loving God and our neighbor with all our heart, mind, and strength.

I'm not going to tell you what to do or not to do during this Lent, but I would like to give you this simple advice: whatever you are going to do, keep it simple, doable, and ...secret. It's about you and your God, a God full of compassion and mercy, a God who knows and loves us as we are, we don't have to fear anything. Have a blessed Lent, turn your hearts to God, repent, and believe to the Good News of Jesus, who gave his life for each of us. Amen.