

***A Gift More Powerful Than...***  
**Advent & Christmas: “The Perfect Gift”**  
**Sermon on Mark 1:1-8 (12/6 & 12/7/14)**  
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Those of you with smart phones – or whose dear ones have smart phones – may be familiar with an app called “Timehop.” I’ve had this app on my iPhone for about a year and I love it so much.

Here’s how it works: the Timehop app connects to your social media accounts – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. – and then it delivers you a daily report of what you posted on those accounts on the same date in previous years. So, like, this morning, my Timehop app delivered to my phone a report of everything I had posted on Facebook and Twitter on December 7<sup>th</sup> for the past several years.

If you are my friend on Facebook, or if you follow me on Twitter, you know I am fond of social media and, depending on the week, I post with some frequency.

Like a lot of people, I try to post on a range of topics: pictures of my dog, social commentary or thoughts about current events in light of Christian faith, goofy experiences I have, quotes by writers who inspire me, church-related information, and the occasional selfie.

When Timehop delivers my daily report, it’s so fun to look through my posts from previous years: it’s kind of like a daily album of my memories. Some things make me roll my eyes and think, “I can’t believe I posted that for people to see!” while other things make me smile with remembrance or pause for thought and prayer.

On Friday of this week, my Timehop report included a post I’d made on Facebook a year ago after learning about the death of anti-Apartheid leader, and former South African president, Nelson Mandela.

He died on December 5<sup>th</sup> of 2013 and his death called to mind the racial injustices of South Africa’s Apartheid system. With national events of recent weeks in mind, the timing was quite powerful...and I couldn’t help but think about one of Mandela’s famous quotes:

He’d said, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

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I was an 11-year-old 6<sup>th</sup> grader in 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released after 27 years in prison for fighting against the racist Apartheid system in South Africa. The Berlin Wall had been torn down just months before, and even those of us who were pre-teens had a sense that big things were happening in our world.

I wish, however, I had paid more consistent attention to Nelson Mandela and to what was happening in South Africa throughout the '80's and '90's. I was vaguely aware of the racist policies of the South African government through its practice of Apartheid...but I was too young back then to care all that much. South Africa was really far away from my little corner of the world.

Yet, I had learned at home and at church that everyone was important, that everyone's life mattered, and that nobody was any more important than anyone else. Though I didn't know the Bible all that well yet when I was 11, I was aware that Jesus somehow made a point of communicating God's care for everyone – regardless of ethnicity or social status.

So I had the clear sense that Nelson Mandela was up there with the greats of peace, justice, and humanitarianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa...Nelson Mandela. Each of them had worked so hard to remind us that *everyone* matters.

When my Timehop app reminded me on Friday morning it was the anniversary of Mandela's death, I was grateful...because it challenged me in my heart of hearts to evaluate my own prejudices – none of which I'm proud of, but that exist nonetheless. At least, when I acknowledge those prejudices, I can begin to allow God to change them, to help me grow in my love for *all* my neighbors.

But this sermon isn't about prejudices and it isn't about Nelson Mandela. It's about John the Baptist. I would argue, however, that important connections can be made between John the Baptist and Nelson Mandela – really, connections can be made between John the Baptist and *any* more modern-day “prophet.”

However, this sermon isn't even really about John the Baptist. It's *really* about Jesus. Jesus, the Perfect Gift, as is our theme for this Advent season. And Jesus' perfection lay, in part, in the way he recognized everyone's worth, the way he taught about God's mercy and about hope for *all* people – regardless of ethnicity or social status.

But Jesus' perfection, his message of God's love for *all*, was not easy for people to hear. It's never easy when someone challenges what's in our heart of hearts. So John the Baptist helped get people ready for the *perfect* message Jesus would bring.

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As we head toward Christmas, we typically like to hear stories about how Mary and Joseph received the news that God was blessing them with a holy child who would be the Savior of the world. We like to think about the angels and the shepherds and the innkeeper of Bethlehem and about the wise men from the East.

We love those stories...but *those* stories are in the first couple of chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Today, we're in the Gospel of *Mark*...and Mark just doesn't bother with any of that birth stuff. For who knows what reason, none of that was important to Mark. He wanted to get right into the nitty-gritty of when Jesus was a grown-up and was all set to begin his public ministry of teaching and healing.

There are no angels, no shepherds...there's no holy family with Mary or Joseph...no innkeeper...no wise men. Not in Mark.

In *Mark*, the only person who really shows up before Jesus himself shows up is John the Baptist – because the prophet Isaiah had said a messenger would come ahead of God's Messiah to “get the way ready,” to “make a straight path for him.” That messenger was John. And he got people ready in a most interesting way.

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John the Baptist spent his time in the desert, he wore clothes made of camel hair, he subsisted on a diet of grasshoppers and wild honey... and, perhaps most strikingly, John didn't require a pulpit and an established congregation of people in order to preach the message he was called to preach. No.

John just started yelling to whomever was nearby: “Turn back to God and be baptized! Then your sins will be forgiven. And, by the way, as important as *my* message is, someone is coming who is far more powerful than I am.” *Someone is coming who is far more powerful...*

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John was on a mission to clear the way for God's Messiah. John knew the message Jesus would bring was a message not everyone was going to like – so the people had to get ready. They had to prepare. And the preparation required for the coming of the Messiah was for God's people to turn their hearts and minds back to God.

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The New Testament of the Bible was originally written in Greek. The Greek word that is translated in today's reading as “turn back,” is *often* translated into English as “repent” or “repentance.”

Now, the original Greek word, here, is the word “metanoia” and it literally means “to think differently after.” So, again, what is translated in today's reading as “turn back” – “turn back to God” – is, in the original Greek, the word “metanoia,” or our English word “repentance”...and it means *to think differently after*.

The *experience* of turning back, of *metanoia*, of repentance – “thinking differently after” – is like this: you make a mistake or someone you care about makes a mistake... the relationship gets off-kilter...

and then you have to make up for it in order to set things right again.

*Repentance* is the “making up for it in order to set things right” part of this experience...and I suspect most of us have gone through it at some point in our lives – probably multiple times:

We mess up and we hurt someone, either a little bit or a lot...we realize what we've done...and we begin the process of making things right: we feel terrible, we apologize, and we modify our behavior so that, hopefully, we don't make the same mistake again. And, this can be a painful process, right?

No one likes to admit when they've hurt someone or when they've been hurt. It's painful for us while we're making up for it...it's painful for the one we've hurt...and vice versa. It takes time and it takes a whole lot of spiritual and emotional energy – but it's worth it if we truly want to make things right, if we truly want to repair and rebuild our relationships with those we've hurt or who have hurt us.

Pastor and writer John Ortberg has helpfully defined this turning back, this repentance, in this way:

“Repentance is remedial work to mend our minds and hearts, which get bent by sin.”<sup>1</sup> *Repentance is remedial work to mend our minds and hearts, which get bent by sin.*

Whether the sin is an action we took or a sinful thought pattern, when we are convicted of that sin – by God's grace – we then set our minds and hearts on a new path.

The new path is repentance, a time of mending what was broken, a time of thinking – and *living – differently after* we are convicted of our sin. For John the Baptist, baptism was the turning point in this process: as a metaphorical drowning, in this baptism, you would die to your sinful self and would then rise again to enter a new, more faithful life.

In The United Methodist Church, we believe it's only by God's grace we can walk a path of repentance. And, as easy as it can be to look at the sin of others – to look at others' need for repentance – John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, calls us *always* to look first at our own sin, our own hearts.

*“Repentance is remedial work to mend our minds and hearts, which get bent by sin.”*

And our hearts are just so incredibly fragile, aren't they? They get bent and broken by our own sin and by others' sins against us...and when that happens, God grabs a needle, mends our sin-broken hearts,

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<sup>1</sup> From John Ortberg's book *The Me I Want to Be: Becoming God's Best Version of You*.

and guides us on that painful path of repentance.

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In this Advent season – this season of preparation and anticipation for Christ's coming into our lives and world – how does *your* heart need mending? Is there grief? Is there fear about the future? Is there prejudice or hatred? Is there anger? Bitterness? Is there loneliness or emptiness? Well...you know what?

Jesus Christ, God's Beloved Son, Savior of the world – Savior of you, of me, Savior of *all* – *he* is a gift that is far more powerful than all of that brokenness: more powerful than our grief, more powerful than our fear, our prejudice, our hatred...he is a gift more powerful than our anger, our bitterness...more powerful than loneliness or emptiness.

*That* is good news, my friends. And *that* is why Jesus Christ is the Perfect Christmas gift. Because he can take our sin-broken hearts and make them whole again. Thanks be to God.

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On this day when we hear John the Baptist's message of repentance and preparation for Christ's coming, it so fitting that we would celebrate Holy Communion...for, today and always, Holy Communion is a time to open our sin-broken hearts and to let God mend them in the way only God can.