



If Only We Can See It

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 1-24-21
Mark 1:14-20, Jonah 3:1-5, 20*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. Amen.

At the heart of what we have called Christian faith is the notion of turning around. It's the original meaning of the word "repentance," that word so many people today dislike because they associate it with being guilt tripped for things that don't matter while ignoring massive things that do. But our church's name sake John the Baptist used the word a lot—it was his whole message. Apparently the Jewish folks who heard him liked this message because they flocked to him like thirsty people in the desert. The word repent was about change, and that was something they knew they needed.

And when John the Baptizer was arrested for being too provocative, Jesus stepped into the void his cousin left and preached almost the same message. He said:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the good news." (Mark 1:14)

So what is the good news, really?

If I think about ordinary good news in my own world, it was hearing this week that there was no violence on Wednesday. Good news that made me weep was seeing the first woman elected Vice President in history, and hearing words of kindness and dignity from the highest leader in our nation. It was learning there is at least a 100 day pause on deporting immigrants, which means that our Liberian friends from St. Andrews in North Minneapolis, and our Mexican neighbors in Richfield, can at least breathe a little easier for now. Good news was a friend of mine who finally adopted a child after years of longing. Good news is having a biopsy return clear of any indicators of cancer.

But there is bigger good news to imagine, and it's this: Jesus said, and is forever saying, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is right here. Repent and believe this.

From where I sit, believing the good news of Jesus isn't about conforming to theological orthodoxy. Believing the good news is about catching fire from the spark of Jesus' words, when he calls the poor blessed. The good news is about suddenly seeing that truly, truly, things do not have to be the way they are. It is possible for things to change. It was possible for the people of Nineveh to repent in dust and ashes in response to the prophet Jonah. It's possible for systemic racism to end. It is possible for us to renounce our ancestors' notions of Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery and the terrible violence that ensued

from those beliefs, and instead recognize the original Jesus who called blue collar fishermen from the backwaters of the Roman empire to follow him, and they did. It's possible to renounce the threads of dominance and possession woven through our culture, and embrace Jesus' Way of Love instead.

It's possible, as President Biden said on Wednesday, for politics not to be a raging fire, destroying everything in its path. It's possible for Christians to learn and to live as if every creature on earth is our kin, which they are. It's possible to repent from seeing others only in terms of my comfort or satisfaction, toward the good news that we live in a breathtakingly beautiful web of connectedness, and that what happens to one of us happens to all of us. It's to see that to care for the earth is to care for our own souls.

When Jesus says, repent and believe the good news, those are two sides of the same coin. They are the inhale and the exhale that together mean breathing. This is about doing what National Youth Poet Laureate said, "There was always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."¹

We need to see someone who embodies this vision, someone who can help our eyes open. This is what Jesus does. We'll never know exactly what caused those first disciples to just

¹ Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb," performed at the Inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris on January 20, 2021, in Washington, D.C. Accessed January 21, 2021 at <https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/a35268319/amanda-gorman-inauguration-poem-transcript/>.

leave everything to follow him. Maybe they had already heard him for a long time and they were ready. Maybe they just had nothing left to lose. I imagine they saw good news in him, and so they followed him to be as close to him as they could, so they could catch that vision too.

For us at St. John's, what does this mean?

For me that question is linked to another question. It's a question asked by the Rev. Howard Thurman, a pastor, mystic and activist from the 1950s who deeply influenced the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Thurman's question was this:

Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself?²

This past October, after a long process of communal discernment, the people of St. John's decided that God was calling us to center the work of racial justice and healing in our church. We decided that we could not be faithful followers of Jesus in Minneapolis in our time and not seek to address this terrible evil. As our Bishop Craig Loya has said many times, we believe that addressing systemic racism is not different from the gospel. It's at the heart of it. So we are obviously putting all

² Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Beacon Press), page 7.

our eggs in the basket of answering Thurman’s question by saying, there has been a betrayal of the genius of the original Jesus, and we are going to repent and believe the vision Jesus offers us, and follow him toward that vision. We are going to seek to be so intimately connected with the Spirit of Jesus that we truly can say we are following him toward Beloved Community—toward the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

I want to invite you to an exercise in imagination, really – if you’re willing, close your eyes and jump in. Imagine all the people of St. John’s in our sanctuary Imagine Chad at the piano or organ. Imagine the clergy at the altar and you sitting where you usually sit or doing what you normally do. Now imagine that we all travel back in time to the year 1909. The community of St. John’s is still forming. The building hasn’t yet been built, but they are gathering for worship and for Sunday School. And a few blocks from St. John’s, there is a black minister, the Rev. William Malone, who has bought a house on Zenith Avenue. The rest of the neighborhood is greatly disturbed about a black person living in their midst. This is actually a true story that I’m telling you, for those who don’t know it.³ The neighborhood meets to decide how to get rid of him. And you are there, the current you, from 2021. They can see you. Pretend somehow they understand that you are from 2021, and they are prepared to believe you and listen to what you have to say.

³ See Curt Brown, “Lake Harriet Neighbors Rejected Black Minister in 1909,” in *Star Tribune*, June 13, 2020, accessed January 21, 2021 at <https://www.startribune.com/lake-harriet-neighbors-rejected-black-minister-in-1909/571241262/>

Knowing what you know about the 112 years since then in our nation and in our city, all the way up to Officer Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck, what would you tell them? What vision would you offer them of different choices they could make? Imagine that they are all devout Christians. What would you tell them about Jesus' Way of Love? What could be different if a flourishing multicultural community had arisen in Linden Hills? Now come back to today. Imagine that the people of St. John's from 2121, our great-great grandchildren, come back to give us some advice. What would you want them to be able to say to us?

Hindsight of course is 20/20, and it's hard enough to see clearly in the moment, let alone have a vision of the future. Yet Jesus' Way of Love offers that. Jesus imagines a world in which violence is not met with violence, but with empowered, nonviolent, loving resistance. Jesus imagines a world in which love is the operating ethic, and in which justice is saving. Jesus enacts a world in which the isolated and abandoned are touched and healed and restored to belonging.

We can see the kingdom of God, the Beloved Community as the light toward which we are journeying; and the way itself as Jesus' Way of Love, step by step. Not domination, but generosity and service. Not possession, but sharing abundantly. Not a justice that punishes, but a justice that restores.

Imagine that we at St. John's have responded to the call of

Jesus. Imagine that we have committed ourselves to the original genius of his Way of Love. Imagine that we are like the disciples who have said, we are going to leave the things that don't work anymore, and move toward what can be. We are going to move toward love, and let go of control. We can listen carefully to the presence of the Holy Spirit among us, and follow where the Spirit leads. We are going to respect the dignity of every other human being, even humans who are debased by cruelty or deception or hate, even though we will never stop resisting cruelty and deception and hate. We are going to examine our subtle biases because we cannot stand a single day more of contributing toward the oppression of other beautiful children of God. We will repent from that history, and we will believe the good news that Jesus' original message, and the risen presence of the Christ among us, is as powerful today as it ever has been.

What is stirring in you, as you hear this? Given your own gifts and burdens, and the presence of God's Spirit in you, what might your role be in this collective journey?

We can't go back in time, to our eternal sorrow and regret. But we can be fully present here, now. We can follow Jesus toward a future that is bright with Beloved Community. "There was always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."⁴ The time is fulfilled, Jesus says. The kingdom of heaven is near. It's right here. Repent and believe the good news. Amen.

⁴ Gorman, *ibid.*