

Change?

Text: Mark 1:1-14

Have you made any New Years resolutions yet? I'm still thinking about mine. This year has kind of gotten off to a strange start. My computer died last Saturday- not a convenient time for a pastor's computer to die, mind you. And the fix it show took pretty much two weeks to fix my car. And Ella had pneumonia again- Melis and I were going to go out when she was diagnosed. I was talking to one of the parents at Will's school the other day- she was saying that she was having a tough start to the year and her kids were too. The other day I was driving back from dropping Ella off when I saw this mom and her son going into the school. When they hit the front step, I could see Dylan start to scream and I watched as she tried to calm him down. And then he ran behind her, pulled up her coat, and stuck his head under it. I laughed out loud. I was like, I think that's kind of how a lot of us are feeling this year. You preach it, Dylan.

Yeah, I'm still thinking about what needs to change this year. But one thing I'm definitely sure about- something needs to change. You know?

But then I got to thinking- is it really possible to change? As much as we like the thought of change- it doesn't seem to happen much. William James, one of the first American psychologists, someone whose very profession is based upon the hope that people can change, was so pessimistic about people changing he said marriage is overlooking. Marriage isn't people growing and changing together- marriage is

overlooking. I laughed out loud the first time I heard that. What he's telling us is that change is hard.

And you know this. Most of us if we try to change anything you know how it goes. We get excited about it and things go well...for a while. And then life intrudes. Things come up. And the good habit we started...well they begin to slide. Then of course there's a decision we have to make. Do get our back up and try harder? Or do we allow the slide to continue until we're pretty much back where we started- or even more behind. And then the cycle begins again. Oh, I know it's heresy to say this- our creed as Americans, especially Oregonian Americans, is that it's always possible to pick up, move, and start over. But, as one of my favorite movies, *Magnolia*, says again and again: we may be through with the past...but the past isn't always through with us. No, as much as I want to believe in change- the honest part of me has to admit it doesn't seem to happen very often.

And this is just like reason number 4,002 that it's a good thing that we have a Gospel according to Mark, and not a Gospel according to Ken. See, Mark is an optimist. Mark believes in change. He believes it's possible to start over with a real hope of breaking with the past. He believes this with all his heart. Heck, he opens his Gospel with the very first line telling us he's all about change- he doesn't open with a little history lesson like Luke does, or with a family picture album like Matthew. No, the first words out of Mark's mouth are: The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The beginning. The start. The start of something NEW! And new means change. And even the style of Mark is all about change- reading the Gospel of Mark is like having a

conversation with an auctioneer. Mark has no time to explain things or to philosophize about things- he's on the move. The most common word in Mark is the Greek word *euthus*, which means 'immediately.' Immediately Jesus went over here. Immediately, then Jesus did this. I like to think of Mark as the Gospel on speed. Basically, the entire thing is about change- and it's at a killer pace.

But, but- the great thing about Mark is that if he's optimistic about change- he's also realistic as well. He knows the terrible difficulty change involves. He knows as much as we long for change- as much as we long for it we resist it, too.

Now, in the story this morning Mark gives us three different examples of people in the midst of change- and really what we hear are three different things that get in the way of change actually taking place.

First off he tells us about the crowds. Don't you love how excited Mark is here? He says that John the Baptist just appears in the wilderness- he just appears. Like one minute the desert is empty, and the next, BAM- there John is. And then Mark says all of the Judean countryside is going out there. And not only that but everyone from Jerusalem! Everyone! This is one of those times where you can be pretty sure the Bible is being figurative and not literal. I mean all of Jerusalem- just from a sanitation perspective if everyone from Jerusalem really was out there at the Jordan, I'm not thinking I would want to be baptized in THAT water, if you catch my drift.

But the important thing isn't how many people are out there- the important thing is that people are going at all. People are going, and for what? To hear this nutjob whose eating grasshoppers tell them they need to face what's out of whack in their lives and

then repent, or change. The order here is crucial. I think the reason people were willing to put up with John's weird appearance and diet is that they sensed he was on to something. If they really wanted to change, if they really wanted to change, they had to face themselves. They had to look inside their own hearts and really see and confess what was going wrong, and then they might receive baptism- not as some kind of magical cure all, but as a marker, a reminder, of this hard work of facing themselves.

Mark knows that unless we face ourselves, and see ourselves honestly, and not just the nice people we pretend to be at church now and then- if we don't do this we don't even have the ability to change. And yeah, facing ourselves doesn't alone bring about change, but without it nothing is going to happen. Do you know this is why we leave a silent prayer of confession after the one we say together? And really, for my money, this is the real prayer. The one we say together, this is just to get you thinking. It's not meant to list out every way you've fallen- how could it? It's just to get you thinking, the silence- this is the time for you to examine yourself, face yourself, and lay yourself before the Holy One.

So if you haven't done so already- give it a little bit of thought. If you're planning on making some new years resolutions, if you think things need to change- spend some time thinking about what needs to heal in you in the first place and face this. Because if we don't- everything we do is just going to be like building a house on a foundation of sand.

So for some of us Mark is saying that the most important thing about effecting change is heading to the river and examining ourselves honestly. But the crowds aren't

the only people looking for change. The next hombre looking for change is the guy in the river- it's John himself. And in him we see that sometimes making a change isn't about us facing ourselves and our behavior- sometimes it's examining our beliefs, taking a cold hard look at the things we just KNOW are true...especially...if maybe they aren't.

You know, if we have the wrong idea about who God is- it doesn't matter how much we believe in it, it isn't going to make it true. I can believe all dogs have three tails- and I can passionately tell you that all dogs have three tails. But you and I both know it doesn't mean all dogs have three tails. It's not a bad thing once in a while to stop and think about the truths we each hold to be self-evident, and to really question whether they actually are...or whether we just want them to be.

Take John for instance. John has this absolutely clear idea of what the Messiah is going to be like. He tells everybody- hey, I'm baptizing you with this lousy, filthy water. But you better get a grip, because the days a gonna come when the Christ, the Messiah, is gonna' show up. And man you better get ready for that. Because he's like- well I can't even tell you what he's like. He's so powerful- he so powerful I can't even put it into words. He's so awesome, I'm not even worthy to bend over and untie his sandals. Oh yeah, you people just better get a grip.

You know all those guys in downtown Portland with the sandwich boards telling you the worlds gonna end and that you're a sinner and all- well they are polite compared to John. In John's mind the Christ is going to be this kick butt God who is going to take no prisoners- and there's gonna be fire and destruction. And John's just hoping he can get to his knees fast enough when the Messiah shows up so he's not in the way. None of this namby pamby God is love and God is in each one of us. No, when the Christ shows

up you just better get ready, because it's going to be fireworks and a laser light show and he's gonna be getting' Medieval on everyone.

John's got all of these ideas- and he gets them from a decent place. He's been reading the Bible. He knows what God is like. So Holy people can't even look him in the face- or if they do he'll die. There's that great story about Uzzah and the Ark in First Samuel, Uzzah is taking the ark to Jerusalem when they hit a pot hole and the ark starts to skid. And Uzzah just sticks his hand out to stop the ark from falling. You'd think he would get a medal for this- he keeps the ark from falling off and being dashed to a thousand pieces. I mean without him Indiana Jones would never have happened. But his reward- he's struck down dead on the spot. Because he touched the ark- the presence of God. And you don't do this! This is what John is thinking- and hey, it's about as Biblical as you can get.

But then what happens? Jesus shows up. And there are no flashing lights. The earth doesn't rumble. It's just some kid with long hair from the backwaters of Galilee, from Estacada, and he isn't there to kick butt and take names. He's there to get into that filthy water with everyone else. In Matthew's version John does recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and because he does John won't let him into the river saying Jesus needs to baptize HIM. But here in the Mark, the very first Gospel, John doesn't even recognize Jesus as the Messiah. John, the one going on and on and on and on about Messiah this and Messiah that, like the most churchy guy you know, the Ned Flanders of the ancient world, when the Messiah actually shows up- he can't even see it. And not because he's a bad guy- but because he's so SURE about what God is going to look like. Not until Jesus

emerges from the water, and the voice names him as Beloved that John's eyes are opened. Oh you can just imagine the look on John's face.

We are John, aren't we? We have such ideas about what God is like and who God can work through and who God can't. For a long time we said only men can be pastors and elders- because...well...we don't know why, we just think God can work better through them, that's all. And women who were called had to live out their ministries on the edges, on the periphery. But live them out they did. In the 19th century there were a ton of women preaching- except they weren't allowed to call it preaching. They had to call it something else. So even though they would stand up and read a scripture passage and then preach the heck of out these texts, except you couldn't say it was preaching- they had to call it testimony. But you know if it quacks like a duck...

And we're no better. We look at the 19th century and those silly men and we roll our eyes. I mean how sophisticated are we- and how dumb were they? But we do the same thing today- only we're more concerned about sex than gender. The church continues to be snarled over whether God can work through gay and lesbian people. And the frustrating thing to people like me is that whether we like it or not, God has already been doing so for some time. Of the many pastors that cared for me and shepherded me through my life- no less than two of them were gay. Each of them were totally different and taught me and shaped me in ways I am just beginning to be thankful for. You know ministry when you see it. When are we going to get it that arguing with one another over whether God can work through a particular class of people is NEVER a good idea. What we have to do is meet with people as individuals, get to know them, hear their story, and

over time decide as a community whether the Spirit is moving in their life person by person.

And in case you think this doesn't cut both ways, I have to say one of the things that annoyed me the most over the break is the liberal outcry over Obama's choice to have Rick Warren pray at his inauguration. Bishop Eugene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal church, a man who has faced his fair share of prejudice called Obama's choice a slap in the face saying, and I quote, that "the God Rick Warren prays to is not the God he knows." Are you kidding me? How on Earth does he know the one to whom Rick Warren, or anyone else, prays? Robinson is doing exactly what people have done to him for years- he is mistaking his disagreement with Warren for whether not God can work through Rick Warren. As if he can know that. I'm all for saying you don't like someone, or you disagree with their theological views, or you don't like the way they pray- but to say that the God he prays to is not your God, i.e. the true God. Come on.

The ideas we have about God sometimes are the very thing that keep us from experiencing God. Who is it that you know God can't work through? Think about this in your mind long and hard. Because whatever names you come up with, whatever images you form- just remember that God is God, and we are not. And this God, if the Bible is at all true and I believe it is, this God seems to LOVE surprises.

Well, there's one last person in this text about change. One more story that shows us how realistic Mark is about change. It's Christ himself. The lectionary passage stops at 11 with him coming up out of the water, but it's not where Mark stops. Mark sustains

it all the way through verse 14. And it's crucial we hear it the whole way. The lectionary version is like the Disney version of the story. The people may have trouble, John may have trouble, but when Jesus emerges from that water God blesses him and all the ships at sea and everything's OK. We can all relax. Everything's solved. Whew! But what happens after the baptism? How does Mark tell the story? Immediately after Jesus is baptized he is hurled, exballo, into the wilderness. There he is starved for 40 days, is assaulted by Satan, and his only company are wild beasts. And if this isn't bad enough what comes next? John is arrested, and we know later, killed.

Oh change comes, but not in a Disney kind of way, not in the way we'd like. Sometimes even when we're doing everything we think we should be doing, life does not go our way- and we just have to hold on and trust that God is with us even when that's pretty hard to see.

The main thing- we won't bring this change about. God will. Our job isn't to create change- but to be alert to where God is already bringing it about and to welcome it, nurture it. Talk about benediction. Styles. The meaning- the hand on our head.