

Life Turned Inside Out and Upside Down

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Possibly the first thing one notices about the Gospel of Mark is how abruptly it begins. There is no story of the birth of Jesus, like in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke - no story of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem because of the emperor's decree; no account of a host of angels appearing to a group of shepherds to celebrate the remarkable gift of peace on earth, good will toward men story that appears in Luke; nor, as appears in Matthew, is the story about Joseph's dream urging him to take Mary as his wife, though she is pregnant; and no story of the mysterious magi traveling from the east. Nor does the Gospel of Mark include a magnificent opening as is found in John's Gospel, celebrating the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. Instead, Mark's Gospel moves right to the thick of the story - to the heart of the gospel message. Look at the initial verse of chapter one. It reads this way: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).

Mark immediately zeroes in on the fundamental invitation of the gospel - the invitation to embrace the good news, and to make this good news the foundation piece of our living. The New Testament writers stress that we do so through repentance - repentance including not simply a sense of sorrow or guilt for past failures and sins, but much more, STOP what you are doing and turn around towards something radically new, the taking on of a new perspective towards life. In Mark's Gospel the call to repentance is initially sounded by John the Baptist, who serves as a forerunner of Jesus, as the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him" (Mark 1:3). For ancient Israel, the wilderness served as a place of stark alternatives, a place for choosing between rebellion against God and faithfulness to God. Here we have John the Baptist continuing that tradition, with Luke's Gospel portraying him as crying

out, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8). In other words, live ethically, share out of your abundance, walk humbly with your God.

John’s call to repentance and transformed living is echoed only verses later when, immediately following his baptism, Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming, “The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). The *Cotton Patch Version* of the New Testament written by Clarence Jordan paraphrases this call to absolute repentance this way: “Reshape your lives, for God’s new order of the Spirit is confronting you (Matthew 4:17)”. Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* offers this rendition: “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message (Mark 1:15)”. And Brian McLaren, writing in his book *Everything Must Change*, offers this paraphrase of Jesus’ challenging invitation:

“The time has come! Rethink everything! A radically new kind of empire is available - the empire of God has arrived! Believe this good news . . . Open your minds and hearts like children to see things freshly in this new way, follow me and my words, and enter this new way of living.”

Each of these translations of the call to repentance underscores our need for a new set of values and priorities in life, for a radical turnaround in our living, an absolute transformation. All of life - heart, mind, and soul; being, thinking, and acting - all is to be refashioned in the light of God’s gracious love. When we repent and become followers of Jesus and embrace the challenging new way of living set before us, life as we know it is turned upside down and inside out.

Even the early opponents of Jesus recognized this unique quality in the lives of his followers. Acts 17:6 records a group of opponents of the early Christian movement in Thessalonica lamenting that, “These men who have been turning the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6 NRSV).

While this group of detractors intent was to criticize the early followers of Jesus, there was significant truth in their words. Because Jesus does indeed turn our customary patterns and understandings inside out and upside down. The Sermon on the Mount, the largest single collection we have of Jesus' teachings, those challenging words of Jesus that prod us to be light and salt in the world, to love our enemies and pray for those who would persecute us, to go the extra mile in relationships, to turn the other cheek when faced with conflict and violence, to live lives of integrity and simplicity and humility - this Sermon on the Mount does indeed offer a way of life that is contrary to what we have all too often grown accustomed to. Jesus' teachings turn our values on their heads, urging community rather than competition; open arms of hospitality and compassion rather than hostility and brokenness; acts of peace and wholeness rather than violence and division.

But you know, it is more likely accurate to suggest that in the gift of Jesus, God intends not so much to turn the world upside down, as to turn the world back right side up! It's a matter of restoring us to God's original intention for creation, living together in harmony and peace. But God's actions do befuddle us. The ancient prophet Isaiah speaking for God notes, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). While you and I live in a world enamored with power and control over others, God chooses the astounding and paradoxical power of "powerlessness". In his book *Finding My Way Home* Henri Nouwen questions, "What was and is God's response to the diabolical power that rules the world and destroys people and their lands?" Then he answers his own question this way:

“The answer is a deep and complete mystery because God chose powerlessness. God chose to enter into human history in complete weakness. That divine choice forms the center of the Christian faith. In Jesus of Nazareth, the powerless God appeared among us to unmask the illusion of power, to disarm the prince of darkness who rules the world, and to bring the divided human race to a new unity. It is through total and unmitigated powerlessness that God shows us divine mercy. The radical, divine choice is the choice to reveal glory, beauty, truth, peace, joy, and, most of all, love in and through the complete divestment of power.”

What kind of God, we may ask ourselves, would choose to enter fully into human life as a vulnerable infant, born to a young couple of seeming inconsequence, in an out-of-the-way corner of the world? New Testament scholar J.B. Phillips, reflecting on God’s powerlessness; God’s risky ways of acting in the world, asserts, “The longer I live the more I grow convinced that the apparent weakness of Jesus is really a tremendous strength.” It is the strength of vulnerability; it is the power of intimacy; it is the clout of a love that draws us in.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian and church leader noted for his resistance to oppression in Nazi Germany, puts it this way:

“We are talking about the birth of a child, not the revolutionary act of a strong man, not the breathtaking discovery of a sage, not the pious act of a saint. It really passes all understanding: the birth of a child is to bring the great turning around of all things, is to bring salvation and redemption to the whole human race. What kings and statesmen, philosophers and artists, founders of religion and moral teachers vainly strive for, now comes about through a newborn child. The birth of a child is to bring about the great turning around of all things.”

At the heart of the Christian faith stands a message that can seem utterly unreasonable - the birth of a child bringing about the turning around of the world. And yet, it is a message indispensable for a world such as ours - a world ever on the lookout for easy answers and certain solutions. However, genuine faith involves venturing forth in faithful living, even when we cannot see the destination.

It's a common critique of the followers of Jesus, and I know you heard it, is that we just don't understand the harsh realities of life; that we are naïve and soft peddle issues rather than facing them directly - forthrightly. But perhaps the opposite is more accurate; possibly, just possibly the truth is that we recognize the power that suspicion and fear, violence and brokenness, hostility and division, can wreak upon us! And so, we find ourselves drawn to a different / an alternative reality; drawn to a life turned upside down and inside out, to a life in which our God is seeking to set things right by modeling the power of powerlessness.

This is the heart of the Advent message - the invitation to embrace a new reality, a new way of seeing and experiencing life. It is to trust in the birth of a child who is able to bring about the turning of the world. A child of hope, a prince of peace, a bearer of justice, a wonderful counselor who enables us to embrace life turned inside out and upside down - and just maybe, to experience life turned right side up!

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift" of Jesus the Christ (2 Corinthians 9:15).
Amen.

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Hatfield Church of the Brethren