

## “SQUARE ONE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE”

MARK 1:14-28, 32-34

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN HARRISBURG,  
PENNSYLVANIA

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ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2018

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In those days Jesus came from Nazareth to Galilee. It sounds like quite a hometown—Nazareth! But you know, Nazareth was way off the beaten track. It’s never mentioned in Hebrew Scriptures, not once. When Nina and I, along with Tim Birney and Cathy Becker and a few other pilgrims, were in Nazareth in December, I was reminded that Jesus grew up in a village of less than 400 people, cut off from any major roads, in a backwater of a backwater, as one scholar puts it.

Jesus was part of a large family. Along with Mary and Joseph and by some accounts at least six brothers and sisters, he lived in a very small house, probably made of field stones. He was the son of a *tektōn*, a carpenter, and he most likely plied the trade of one who fashioned door frames and roofbeams and probably made cabinets and bedframes. This is all we know about his coming of age, except for Luke’s account of a family trip to Jerusalem when he was 12.

His life is hidden from view until he’s about 30 – a full 18 years. And suddenly, Mark has Jesus bursting out of the blue:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;  
repent and believe in the good news.

This ringing proclamation marks square one in Jesus’ public ministry and square one for his followers in every generation, especially on Ash Wednesday.

I’m guessing you expect to hear in a few minutes the following words as ashes are signed on your forehead in the shape of a cross:

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

It’s a profound and sobering call to humility, to face your humanness as a child of God, to embrace your earthly life as God’s gift to be cherished.

Back in the 1960's the Roman Catholic Church made these words optional for Ash Wednesday services. A new choice was drawn straight from Jesus' call to discipleship found in tonight's lesson from Mark's Gospel:

Repent and believe in the good news.

This is what we'll be saying as ashes are signed on your foreheads this evening, so let's take a close look at what it means to repent.

The first thing that needs to be said is that the English word "repent" is a weak sister to the Greek it attempts to translate. New Testament scholars are nearly unanimous in saying it's a horrible translation, a tired old church word. "Repent, say you're sorry, and go to your room." It just doesn't knock the breath out of us, and what Mark conveys with a Greek verb does just that.

The verb is *metanoieite*, from the noun *metanoia*. No English word does it justice. It's about radical, fundamental transformation, a cosmic shift of mind and heart. Let's look at this verb with care. It's plural in number, present in tense, and imperative in mood. It's about humans in community, right now, being called to a brand-new way of life, with no room to wiggle out.

It's a lot more than saying we're sorry. It's about laying aside the old one and putting on a new mind. That's how John Calvin put it. *Metanoia* is a change of perception that bears good fruit. The kingdom of God is coming near. Believe it and act on it!

Jesus heads off to Capernaum with his brand-new team of Simon, Andrew, James and John and begins to flesh out the call to *metanoia* or conversion to a new way of being. It's still day one and he's in the synagogue making waves. We're not sure exactly what his lesson plan was, but we know he got sideways with a man with an unclean spirit.

It's hard to say what this was all about, but you know what I think? This man represents those who want nothing to do with *metanoia*. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God, and I'm standing pat." Who among us can't relate to this outburst?

Jesus finishes up his first day of his ministry with what seemed like everyone in Capernaum gathered at the door of the house of Simon and Andrew, wide eyed as Jesus cured many who were sick and cast out many demons.

What's not very clear at this point is the makeup of the new mind Jesus is offering those who follow him, who "get" *metanoia*. Precisely what is to become incarnate in us as the good news of God comes near? Not a finished reality, but oh so near? This suggests we must be on the lookout for the details of the good news in which we are to believe.

A pilgrimage is prime time for finding lookouts that lead to true repentance, to a cosmic shift of mind and heart. We found our square one at the Mount of the Beatitudes on the Sea of Galilee. Our plan was to celebrate the Lord's Supper in a glen alongside the

lovely Church of the Beatitudes, and so we brought bread and wine from our hotel. What we hadn't done was get permission in advance from the Franciscans in charge of this holy site.

I asked our Palestinian guide, Hassim, to check in at the office for us. He came back smiling. The nun in the office said "Yes, of course," and handed him a small basket, which puzzled him. I smiled and said, "We Presbyterians know an offering basket when we see one." At the close of our service we gladly did our share.

We broke bread and shared one cup around a rough-cut stone table, and heard Jesus say, "This is my body, broken for you; this is the cup of the new covenant of which you are now a part." As always the question loomed: What will it take to knock the breath out of us and fill our hearts and minds with the reality of this new covenant?

Aha! moments came as we visited the Church of the Beatitudes and walked the grounds together. Small signposts in various languages beckoned irresistibly:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*Blessed are the peace makers, for they will be called children of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,*

*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*

I get this! It sounds right. But where are we to find a down-home "square one" in our violence-ridden world where we can experience the nearness of the kingdom of God?

To our astonishment we were to find it in the hills southwest of Bethlehem at a Palestinian farm named Tent of Nations. It has been in the Nassar family since 1916. The 100-acre farm is on prime agricultural land, producing olives and grapes and almonds and other crops. It is almost entirely surrounded by five settlements. The Israeli government has declared it to be part of a security zone and for years has been trying to displace the Nassar family.

We arrived by van and had to scramble over an embankment of rubble piled in the middle of the dirt road by the military just to make things difficult for the Nassar family and their visitors. As we approached the farm gate we saw a sign written in several languages:

WE REFUSE TO BE ENEMIES

One of the patriarchs in the family a generation back was Bishara Nassar, who was a child when his father bought the land in 1916. Bishara is an Arabic name that means Gospel – Good News. Can you imagine being a kid named Good News? My mind took me back to third grade after my family moved from West Virginia to central New York. My teacher asked me to tell the class my name, and what fun it would have been to say Good News Brown instead of Jimmy!

Bishara was a gifted preacher and accordionist who traveled town to town, house to house sharing a message straight out of the Sermon on the Mount. He was convinced that every Christian is called to be a peacemaker.

This can only happen when metanoia is a daily reality. Daoud, one the brothers currently running the farm, tells of being approached by a settler with an M16 over his shoulder who was shouting, “What are you doing on our land?” “It’s ours,” replied Daoud, “and we have the papers to prove it.” “You may have all the papers,” the young man said, “but God gave us this land; that is why it is ours and not yours.”

Settlers and soldiers have uprooted hundreds of trees, damaged farm equipment, and harassed the Nassars, hoping to force them off the land to which they’ve had title for over 100 years. In recent years they have spent \$170,000 fighting in Israeli courts to hang on, all the while refusing to be enemies.

Daoud and his family live by what they call the Fourth Way. Here’s how he describes the first three ways many Palestinians are responding to a military occupation that has lasted 70 years:

First, some Palestinians believe we could achieve our just objectives through violence;

Second, there are Palestinians who argue that we must wait patiently until the international community can bring about a just peace;

Third, many of those who are highly educated, including a good number of Christians, are simply leaving Palestine, despairing of hope for a just future.

The Fourth Way is the way of active, non-violent resistance. “We refuse to be anybody’s enemies. We confront our suffering in a positive, proactive way, believing that the occupation cannot, and will not, last forever. The crucial question we ask is ‘How can I “turn” the perspective of someone who believes that I am his enemy?’”

Daoud tells the story of piling his family into their 1975 Volkswagen bus on a Saturday evening so they could be in Bethlehem for worship the next morning. As they bumped along the road a unit of Israeli commandos in full gear jumped out at them. The officer ordered them to get out of the van, so it could be searched.

It was a cold and windy night and Daoud pleaded to no avail for the soldiers to spare his children a trauma that would stay with them for a long time. Daoud awakened his children, saying quietly in English so the soldiers would understand: "You will wake up and see soldiers with guns. You shouldn't be frightened because they seem to be friendly people." When the soldiers finished their search, the officer called Daoud over and said: "Sir, I feel we need to apologize to you and your family. What we did was not right."

This Fourth Way is the spirit that pervades Tent of Nations in its summer camps for children, its work with international volunteers, and its women's empowerment project in a neighboring village. One of your spiritual disciplines this Lent is to go to [www.tentofnations.org](http://www.tentofnations.org) and see for yourself.

Square ones do exist, and the kingdom of God does come near. This Ash Wednesday in the year of our Lord, 2018, let us all repent and believe in the good news!