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Lent 1B
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When I was a child, attending evangelical and more conservative churches than the one I call home these days, we didn't attend to the seasons of the year quite like the more liturgical churches. And we didn't have a season of Lent with its focus on confession and penitence. But repentance and salvation were always the focus of our prayer, preaching, and music.

When I was about six, I spent a weekend with my grandmother, my Mamaw, who still lives in a small town in western Kentucky. On Sunday morning, we went to her church—a church she had attended since her own childhood. I remember that the sermon was particularly stirring that day. It must have been if I am remembering bits of it almost forty years later. I remember that the pastor warned us of the judgment we would face if we would not turn away from the sin in our lives. But he also promised that if we did repent and get ourselves saved, our reward would be eternal life. We would go to heaven where we would be joined with all those we had loved and lost. And we would reside there in the company of Jesus for eternity.

As a six-year-old, I wasn't particularly worried about my sins. I had not yet had the chance to do a lot of sinning, and so judgment day did not instill great fear in me. But what did terrify me, oddly enough, was the idea of eternity. Heaven and being reunited with loved ones that I knew I would lose someday sounded wonderful...but my young mind got stuck on the idea of every day like the one before, changelessness, time without limits. I remember tossing and turning for hours at the horror of this monotonous fate.

I tell this story to illustrate the complexity of our Christian doctrine of salvation. What do we mean by being saved? What does it take to be saved? What are we being saved from and to what end? Evangelical churches might say that mainline denominations, like ours, ignore the demands of a salvation doctrine at our peril. It's true that it's not something that we talk a lot about and yet, the Gospels certainly do.

Today's Gospel from Mark tells the story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in which he was baptized by John. John was out in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John baptized Jesus, and then Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tested and attended to by the angels. When he emerges after forty days, he begins his ministry in Galilee proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The time is fulfilled--this is an apocalyptic proclamation. Once the time had been fulfilled, history was supposed to turn around. Jesus was announcing that he understood God's plan. In fact, he is God's plan—he is the intervention. And what should the response of the people be to this apocalyptic proclamation? Repent and believe. Turn around, get on the right path, and act in the ways being taught by Jesus, the teacher—the one who understands the mind and plan of God.

Apocalyptic proclamations in the Gospels might seem problematic. After all, Jesus died. He was resurrected, but there is still great suffering in the world. Where is this new kingdom that was breaking in? It can be hard to make sense of it all.

One solution to this problem has been to turn salvation into an entirely afterlife event. Repent and believe now so that you can enter into the heavenly kingdom upon death.

That solution, however, is as problematic as the apocalyptic proclamations of Jesus. If we turn salvation into an entirely afterlife event, we might be tempted to ignore the call of Jesus for us to seek personal transformation in the here and now so that we may share in the life of God.

Jesus did not give his disciples easy answers to the challenges of following him. In Chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel, which we will hear next Sunday, Jesus says to his disciples and to the crowd, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

There was no obvious roadmap leading to salvation that Jesus shared with his followers. After telling them the parable of the sower in the fourth chapter of Mark, he said to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom." Not the key to the kingdom. Not the secret to entering the kingdom. He gives them the mystery. And in Mark's Gospel, discipleship means following the mystery of Jesus where he goes. The disciples were often confused by the words and actions of Jesus, but they still followed. Discipleship's primary role was to be with Jesus, to be by his side, or more accurately to be behind him and to follow where he led.

Perhaps we are also called to follow the mystery of Jesus wherever it leads, even if we don't fully understand what salvation will mean. Here we are on the first Sunday in Lent. It has been said that, "Lent is a deep slow walk that leads us to new life." (Becca Stevens). What might we discover about the mystery of Jesus and the kingdom of God that has come near? What might we learn about our living, our dying, and our salvation on this deep slow walk that is our Lenten journey? I invite you to be intentional about your Lenten walk this year, however that might look for you. Pray. Read scripture. Open yourself to the mystery of discipleship. And look for places in your life that the kingdom of God has come near. Amen.

