

Back to the Future

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher

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Mark 1:14–20 and Jonah 3:1–5, 10

The 1980's movie, *Back to the Future*, is a classic. One of the reasons is that as the movie ends, Doc, played by Christopher Lloyd, tells young Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) that he and his high school sweetheart need to join him 30 years in the future, in 2015, because their future children need their help. The last scene is them looking alarmed, thinking “We have children!?!” In 1985, 2015 seemed so far away. But now we have long passed 2015. As the DeLorean took off heading for the future, we knew there would be a *Back to the Future, Part II*.

Although we do not have flying cars and hovering skateboards, as they depicted 2015 would have, it is quite entertaining to try to imagine what the world would be like in the future that is just barely out of our grasp.

The first *Back to the Future* movie dealt with the misunderstood high school student Marty McFly; he went back in time to 1955. He helps his parents “get it right” with a tweak here and a nudge there in order to set the trajectory that made his life a lot better thirty years later.

Today, I want us to go back in the past, not to tweak what was but to capture what it means to be a follower of Christ. For some who wear the mantle of Christian, what that means may have gotten a bit distorted and skewed. Let us go back to where it all began when Jesus started his ministry. Let us head back to the banks of the Sea

of Galilee in the first century of the common era. The fishermen would be starting their day before the sun got too hot. It would be an ordinary day; their conversation may have been about the market price of fish or how good or bad their last catch was. Or maybe they might have been talking about the rise of Mary and Joseph's son, Jesus who was teaching with such assurance and authority you could not help but listen. Mark gives us only the bare bones in this passage scene.

Reading from the gospel of mark at the beginning of Jesus' ministry:

Mark 1:14–20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Jesus begins with a message. "The time is ready, and the kingdom of God is near." Jesus does not open with a story or a joke; or an iconic movie scene or in his day a cultural reference; he gets right to the point. There is urgency; the time is now. Jesus says, God is near; repent and believe the good news. Repent and believe.

These are Jesus' first spoken words in the Gospel of Mark. Up until now, we have heard about Jesus, about his baptism and about God's pleasure with Jesus. We know about Jesus in the third person as told by the gospel writer, and now Jesus speaks. And his first words point to the good news, evangelion, as it is known in Greek. Jesus is telling about a new relationship with God the creator.

A movement begins. We are very aware how people start movements today. You need branding, a social media account, and you need to lay the groundwork all before you even begin your movement. Today the word gets out in ways unfathomable to the people of the first century. But Jesus chooses another way. He walks up to where the common fishermen are working, and he talks with them and invites them to follow him.

Why Simon and Andrew, why fisherman? Jesus was a carpenter by trade but he chose the sea to find his followers. Jesus offers this good news to ordinary unassuming folks. We have no idea how faithful, how observant, Jews were. He doesn't quiz them on 'how well you know God's law,' he doesn't ask nor does he suggest they think it over, the call is to follow and immediately they do. They take the first step in an odyssey, which changes their lives forever.

This is where it all begins, at the edge of the sea. Along the way the church is born with all its hierarchy; the committees, treatises and doctrines. The church and Christ's followers have taken many divergent paths since that day. Jesus did not ask his followers to go and reclaim the holy land by might and carnage; they did that on their own with Crusades. Jesus does not teach them to claim lands for their own and to separate children from their parents in order to

assimilate them into “Christian/European cultural ways as Colonizers did with our Indigenous people throughout the world. Jesus is not demanding that they support an amoral political leader so that their social agenda would be stratified. No, Jesus tells them that God is close by now so repent; review your own life and follow Him. That message over the centuries tends to get lost in translation. That message is not to divide to produce hate but to unite and bring people together.

What would Christianity be like if we were to hold that image of Jesus walking along the seashore announcing the immediacy of God’s presence and calling us to follow and we followed? If we could go back and stand with Simon and Andrew, and feel the urgency and excitement of the compelling call to follow Jesus, would we follow?

We are not in 30 AD, we are in 2021, and a lot has happened between then and now. We cannot ignore the past, it is part of us and what shapes us, but we must hold our past lightly. Being entrenched and being afraid to let go of what was then, becomes a burden rather than a help as we move forward.

Which brings us to Jonah. Jonah has many problems, and his problems get worse when God calls him to warn Nineveh of their imminent destruction. Jonah refuses to carry out God’s call and you know what happens, that thing with the big fish!! Finally, he is convinced and he tells Nineveh what is going to happen to them if they don’t turn from their wicked ways. They change and God does not obliterate them from the face of the earth. But Jonah, in good Old Testament tradition, wants them to be wiped out. God spares them and Jonah cannot let go of the past. That past in which

Nineveh is his enemy stays with him and he can't move into the future.

We need our past but we need not be stuck there. Children grow up and change. Attitudes and prejudices can change. Those who were once sworn enemies are no longer.

Jonah, and all his travails, reminds us that hanging on to a way of thinking long after it is useful only ends up hurting ourselves. The people of Nineveh were not right with God. They chose a path that worked against god but they saw their errors and moved from their ways into a new life for the future. But it was Jonah who was stuck.

Jesus bursts on the scene by the shore in sleepy Galilee and is telling the people that there is something new in how you relate to God. A new day has come. Some could not let go of the image of the avenging God. They could not see a God who they could actually relate to and with.

We are in a time where we have to resolve our past and what our country has become, as well as look toward what our country can possibly be. We have this overwhelming feeling that makes us wonder, can things really change or are we doomed to devolve into self-centered greed and opportunism? Can we repair the wrongs of the past? Can we change systemic racism and the abuse of our planet? What can we do in an insignificant place with a small fraction of those who claim the name of Christians who say no to inequality who say no to racism? We are not in the majority with those thoughts.

If we could go back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his first word was repent, acknowledge what has gone wrong and believe

in the good news. God is nearby. God's kingdom is based on love not hate. This message is open to all not just to the few or the qualified.

With these words, we have an opportunity to turn toward each other rather than away from each other. We have a chance to define each other not by our differences but by being a neighbor. This week for our staff meeting, our Administrator, Sue, gave our devotion and she referred to Mr. Rogers, our very favorite Presbyterian.

The Wisdom of Mister Rogers

Mister Rogers didn't call us "acquaintances" or "friends"; he didn't call us "boys or girls" or ladies and gentlemen." He called us neighbors. "Neighbor" is a biblical language, which Fred, as an ordained Presbyterian minister, knew well.

When Mister Rogers called us neighbors, when he hosted us in his own NEIGHBORHOOD for over 30 years, he was calling us – gently but firmly – out of our structures of power and our silos of sameness, into lives of mercy and care for one another.

Admittedly, maybe he was overly optimistic. Maybe he was calling us something better than we actually were. But maybe he believed that if he got to us while we were young, if he told us, again and again, that we were good, that we were lovable, and that we could extend mercy, maybe we could grow into real neighbors to one another. Maybe we still can.”¹

Fred Rogers, went back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry in order to be present for children and adults and move them into the future.

¹ The Wisdom of Mr. Rogers

White Evangelical Protestant Christians are getting tainted through the ones who have compromised their values to support our former President. People have opinions and reasons for supporting whoever they want but to drag the name of Christ and imply that this is what Christ would do is a very dangerous and inaccurate route. As a result, those who do not know what it means to be a Christian do not see Christ's message of love, but one of deceit and division. They hear the loudest voices taking up the oxygen.

That is not who we are. We as a church welcome all. Our vision is one where Christ is the one who calls all those who are willing to follow and we try to live out what it means to love our neighbor.

We do not presume to know the heart of another but we do know that the message that Jesus taught is more about neighbors and love rather than closing doors and building walls. We are in the business of loving our neighbor regardless of who our neighbor may be.

Isn't that what God is asking us today? We are not in possession of all the answers. We are not here to bestow our own way but we are here to learn more. Jesus is calling us from the past, not to be in the past that festers and nurses grudges and hate, but to take account of what we have done and left undone as we move into the future with urgency. The world needs to hear what Jesus has to say today in a clear and clarion way, not twisted with a self-serving rationale.

I would like to close with part of Amanda Gorman's, National Youth Poet Laureate, inaugural poem, for she does an eloquent job of recognizing our past and present as well as moving us into the future.

*And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us
but what stands before us
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside
We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another
We seek harm to none and harmony for all
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:
That even as we grieved, we grew
That even as we hurt, we hoped
That even as we tired, we tried...*

*The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it²*

Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is near, repent and follow the Good news!" This is our way into the future. Thanks be to God.

² Amanda Gorman