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# The Pinnacle

February 2021

## *In Spite of COVID-19*

*Christ is Born and FBC Celebrates*



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### “The Depths:

#### What Reading Does for Your Brain”

I’ve been reading some interesting stuff lately. As your pastor, I’m always reading. I prioritize reading. No one, no matter how intelligent, can offer a sermon, a Wednesday talk, and lead an Advent or Lenten Book Club week in and week out without reading. A lot. I usually read several books at a time. Currently, I’m visiting with Fred Craddock by reading his book *As One Without Authority* (a clever play on Mark 1:22). I read this one years ago in seminary, but some books should be read more than once and his is one of them.

I’m also rereading a book by Cal Newport entitled *Deep Work*. Cal, as Kristy and I have taken to calling him in our house, writes books that get shelved with the works of other “productivity” writers like Stephen Covey and David Allen, but he ventures beyond the simple “how-to” nature of most. Cal is not a productivity guru by trade but a computer science professor at Georgetown University. His books are about personal productivity, but they are chock full of interesting historical allusions, neuroscience discussions, and sober-eyed critiques of technology usage in the 21st century. That last mention brings me to another book in my current reads stack: Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. I’m riveted by this book. I can’t put it down. Carr nearly won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction with this tour de force in neuroplasticity that likens the initial networking of two computers to the reshuffling of metal letters on the face of Gutenberg’s press. Also in my current reading stack is Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* (we have a book club coming up), Ann Matheny’s history of Middlesboro (a great read) and two books by University of Kentucky historian Ronald Eller. Eller specializes in Appalachian history (also very good). As your pastor, I’m always reading. I prioritize it, for no one can put out a sermon, a Wednesday lesson, lead a weekly book club, and be thoughtfully present in pastoral conversations and correspondence (like

newsletter articles!) without putting a lot back in. Crudely, it’s like keeping the gas tank above E.

One more thing, lest one of the fundamentalists around gets his hands on this newsletter and says, “See, I told you so about that First Baptist Church!”: I read the Bible too. A lot. And Bible commentaries—I have whole shelves of them—a lot. The Bible is still my favorite book. I don’t say that glibly. I mean it. I can’t quite put my finger on it aside from saying it has something to do with the Holy Spirit, but it is true that the Bible has the capacity to enchant me like no other book I read. My brain heats up. Sparks fly. Bam! My imagination and desire to create something take me over. A couple hours later, I wander out to get a cup or coffee and a sandwich.

This month, I “testify” here in hopes that I encourage you in your reading. Read the Bible, read other books. Nicholas Carr points out that from a neuroscientific standpoint, reading is reading no matter what the content, and it is good for your brain. Fred Craddock, decades before Carr, points out that when it comes to matters of spirituality, content matters too. But Craddock was no fundamentalist. He famously asked his homiletics (the 50-buck seminary word for preaching) students what they were reading. He meant outside of class. And he told legion of them, “You’re not reading enough fiction.” Fiction, you see, fires and tempers the imagination, and imagination is critical to preaching, and to Christian testimony in general.

I “testify” here as a way of pulling the curtain back and letting you peer into the pastor’s study, of pulling the back off and showing you some of the gears and mechanisms of the church ticking, ticking. I also do it as a way of asking you: “What are you reading these days?” What I’m reading says that whatever it is, it’s good for your brain. Even so-called “low-brow,” “mass market paperback” fiction. Unless it’s online and hyperlinked and framed in ads. Again, see Nicholas Carr.

Write me and tell me. I’d love to hear from you.

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So familiar to our ears, we can hardly hear it anymore, the coming of the Wise Men on Epiphany in Matthew 2 is actually a most thrilling story. It has intrigue, it has politics, it has prophecies, it has kings and kingdoms and declarations of vassal allegiance. The story of three kings bringing their gifts to the house of Mary and Joseph has so much going on in it that it can be simply overwhelming to the preacher and to the listener to get it all in the sermon. Another year, another Christmastide and Epiphany, another sermon centered on these there mysterious figures. This time around, I want to talk about fear. Herod's fear. The Common English Bible says he was troubled, but other translations say he was afraid or frightened or terrified. His fear, it is a driving force in this story.

Herod is the provincial Roman king over Judea. Robert Barron calls him, "the consummate political survivor. A canny, realist who, through threats, murder and corruption, found his way to the top of the political ladder." I would only add to that description the four foot political step ladder. Herod is playing the Roman game. He's a Roman pawn more than a king, but even as such, he has enough power to make life a little better or a lot worse for the people of Judea. Matthew calls him King Herod. At least at first. It's both a nod to the kings and kingdoms of old and a nod to the fact that even as a mostly inconsequential Roman mayor, Herod could do good with his post if he chose to.

"In the time of King Herod," Matthew begins. "When King Herod heard this," Matthew continues. Then, "Herod secretly called for the wise men. When they heard the King," Matthew tells the story. But interestingly, that's where that word drops off. That's the last time in Matthew 2 that Herod gets called a king by the Gospel writer. From there, it's just Herod. Matthew seems so careful at first to use this title that would have sounded absurd to the passing Roman. So careful that the subsequent omission of it must be intentional. Have a look. Get your Bible out and look at this story. In verse 9, it's King. In verse 13, it's Herod. In verse 16, it's "When Herod saw." In verse 19 it's, "When Herod died" In verse 22, Herod's son, Archelaus is not called king, nor is his dead father. The word disappears about a third of the way through Matthew 2.

What's that about? What happened here? To me, there's an obvious answer and a less obvious answer to this question. The obvious answer is Jesus. If you're in church and somebody asks a question, that's a good safe bet. Jesus has been made the King in this story. There's little doubt that that's what Matthew is driving at here. The word homage, after all, is used three times in this passage. Homage is not just honor, homage is political allegiance. Look it up in the dictionary. Homage is what a vassal state pays to its ruling state. The use of the word homage is why we get, "We three kings," in the old carol. The great Roman Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas wrote in his commentary on Matthew in the Middle Ages what I opened this service with. The Magi found three things in Christ. Namely, royal dignity. So they brought him gold as a tribute. Two, the greatness of a priest and therefore the alter spice frankincense as a sacrifice. And three, human morality, and therefore the burial spice myrrh.

The obvious answer to the question about King Herod is that King Jesus has just taken his place. But I think there's another lesson here that speaks directly to me and you and our lives lived today. In one sense, Herod ceases to be the King when Jesus is coronated by the wise men, but in another sense, Herod ceases to be the king when he does what the Advent angles always say not to do. When he becomes afraid, frightened. Or better still, when he lets his fear call the shots. Fear, by itself, is simply human. But action based in fear is dangerous. It's sinful and too often, is deadly. Matthew calls him King Herod at the beginning. Matthew calls him King Herod when he says he was afraid, because fear is only human. Matthew calls him Herod, King even when he has a secret meeting with the wise men. Kings do that sometimes. Matthew calls him Herod, just plain Herod, when his fear turns to rage, turns to genocide. Matthew quotes a prophet, "A voice was heard in Ramah. Wailing and loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be consoled, because they were no more." In a very real sense, Herod ceases to be King in Matthew's eyes when homage is paid to King Jesus. In another very real sense, Herod ceases to be king in Matthew's eyes when he becomes overwhelmed with his own fear.

Herod had wealth and privilege. Herod could have been such a help to Jesus and God's kingdom. But Herod was overwhelmed with fear. Herod became the antithesis of everything Jesus stands for because he allowed his own fear to

overwhelm him. And in this story, this rich, complex story, Herod is overwhelmed with fear and he's gearing up for genocide, but the wise men are overwhelmed also. Overwhelmed with joy, verse 10 tells us.

Now, that's an entirely different matter. Herod, an insider, is overwhelmed with fear and becomes an outsider. The wise men, outsiders, are overwhelmed with joy and become insiders. The wise men become kings even as Matthew strips Herod of the title. To borrow from Jesus' sermon just a little bit later in Matthew's gospel, they became great in the kingdom of heaven and Herod becomes the least.

Beloved, on this first Sunday of 2021, in the ongoing season of Christmastide, celebrating our God, who so loved the world that God showed up in human flesh to be closer to us, on this Sunday, with all that going on, Matthew's Gospel holds up to our eyes two ways of living. Fear and joy. Joy and fear.

If you believe it, believe the incarnation, believe that God is good and gracious and loving. Believe that Jesus conquered death in his life, death and resurrection. If you believe that God is Emmanuel, God with us, then bring your gifts and find joy in paying homage to the God of grace in this new year.

If you believe it, joy is within our grasp. But when other Gods crowd in, fear can take hold. Herod's story shows us that. The wise men's story shows us the road to salvation. Homage to the new king, in a new year.

Won't you bring your gifts? Your gifts, your talents, whatever you have, to the house of Mary and Joseph, this very day. And celebrate the King that gives us cause to be joyful in 2021.

I've been baptized twice, though I don't personally remember the first time. I don't remember it, but my family does. My godparents do. They gathered 'round the priest as he poured water over a little brow that, in hindsight, looked a lot like little Elliot's.

I think this is beautiful. I relish that this happened to me. I didn't get baptized again later because I believed this one didn't count. How can I say that? Family and friends all around, the minister and the water and the church, the hopes and dreams of a family for their child. The promise in the naming of godparents to support that child in life and faith always. I think this is beautiful. I relish that it happened.

I didn't get baptized a second time because of theology about baptism—what counts and what doesn't—or out of some sense of absence. I did it the second time because I felt the Spirit nudge me. In a way, the script runs exactly as you'd expect. A boy growing up with one foot in the Roman Catholic Church and one foot in Independent Christian Churches—grandmother's hopes and dreams held in and through both—gets baptized in both. I didn't plan it that way. I was 17, and I didn't plan much of anything at 17. I was nudged. The water was clean and clear. The light was bright. There was applause. Not really for me, but for God and God's church.

I think this is beautiful, too. The family gathered around the font with the priest; standing belly deep in the water with the minister—each in their own way, each of my baptisms are beautiful to me. Each of them teach me something about faith.

In the image of a family carrying a baby to the water, I see that faith is something longed for, hoped for by a whole host of people. That faith begins long before you and I arrive on the scene with all our answers and opinions, or even the ability to speak them.

In the image of a teenager stepping out into the aisle and walking toward the baptistery, I see that faith asks something of you and me, That it wants us to show enough humility in our reply that we don't mind getting sopping wet in front of a crowd of people.

If you take me aside at the water fountain and ask me which of these is "right," I'll say "Yes."  
Whether it's a teenager choosing confirmation of what happened to her long ago or a teenager stepping into a pool of water and doing it all at once, "Yes." I believe God is plenty big enough to figure out how to draw us in, no matter how much water we use.

If you then ask me, "So what's it all about then? Baptism?", I'll say, "It's about formation."

We live in an increasingly digital world. A world of information. And a world built on information draws us into an extreme sense of individualism. I don't need anyone to figure out how to bake a pie, I have Google. I don't need Mom's advice on repairing the hinges on the door, I have YouTube. I don't need the doctor, or the lawyer, or the pastor—I have WebMD, LegalZoom, and Theopedia.

I don't need anyone else. I have this hunk of glass and metal and lights that teaches me to call it "smart."  
If you ask me, "What what's it all about then? Baptism?", I'll say, "It's about living better than that."  
Faith doesn't work like that. Neither does medicine or law, for that matter. Information downed from shot glasses with only the company of an smartphone may inform us—though that's questionable—but it does not form us. It doesn't grow us up. A deluge of information aimed right between your eyes neglects that there is another 4 or 5 or 6 feet of you standing beneath our nose that is still, you.

Faith is old school. Faith is analog. Faith is the stuff of the last age, and it seems to be getting less traction these days because it finally cannot be reduced to 4.7 inches of UHD LEDs encased with a couple of speakers. Faith doesn't work that

way. Don't get me wrong: I'm not arguing for a return to AD 1250. I'm just point out that Jesus could have taught us in any way Jesus chose, and Jesus chose to get in the water with John the Baptist, the epitome of old school.

We can't afford to miss that piece of information, because it holds the key to our own formation into the image of Christ. Jesus could have done it any way he wanted. He could have downloaded the file and left it for us, but instead, he joined a crowd of hopeful, dreaming people, heard words, said, felt water flow, and joined a celebration that included everyone on both sides of the heavens.

Jesus knew that faith couldn't be reduced to 1s and 0s. That's what he fought about with the religious leaders of his day. They wanted to get the theological points—the information—just right. Jesus cared about that, but he went further. He cared about the formation of those 4, 5 or 6 feet of you below your nose, too. All of you, and not just the parts of you that allegedly "smart" phone can touch.

In an Internet-worshipping age that seeks to reduce everything to a profile or a post, Jesus' baptism is a reminder of your baptism, is a reminder that much in this life cannot be reduced down to flickering lights and sounds. Punching "Baptism" into Google can never replace words spoken over you and the presence of family and friends around you, cheering you and cheering God. No social media platform comes up to you after you towel off and hugs you. No website rushes up from the fellowship hall in an apron to smile and speak before going back down to put the finishing touches on the celebration. The meal shared can't be sniffed, can't be savored, though a smartphone.

Beloved, we're all well aware that this past year, we've had to do church differently. That has been right and as good as there is. We are still in that place now as the caseload and death toll of COVID-19 continues to increase. I'm not saying with this sermon that you should be here in the room today. I'm saying with this sermon that you should be present to your church today. You know—all those other people who like you try to do life together and do it well—your church. Not likes, but phone calls. Not posts, but letters. Faith is a remarkably analog thing. And judging from this past week, we all need a little more analog in our lives.

Stay informed, but don't gulp down every news story that tugs at your eyeballs.

Use Google, okay, but maybe once or twice a week, skip Google and ask your grandfather or your mother or your sibling or your friend instead. How do you cook a steak? How do you fix a sticking door? How do I change my car battery? You'll still get the information that YouTube would have given you, but what more might come your way that YouTube can't give you?

I'm not arguing that we all return to the days of cast iron farm tools and telegraphs. I'm merely pointing out that Jesus could have just written it all down in a file and left it for us atop the mount, but instead he preached a sermon. Jesus could have told us what Baptism means, but instead, Jesus gets into the water with John and shows us.

Jesus could have just stopped by, talked for a bit, and left, but Jesus didn't do that. As Frederick Buechner said it, Jesus "touched, tasted, smelled his way to the holy and hidden heart of things." Things we touch and taste and smell every day.

Shouldn't we do that, at least occasionally, too?

A symphony, in stained glass. If you've ever seen a good photo of—or been fortunate enough to see in person—the great rose windows of Notre Dame de Paris, you've seen the granddaddy of all stained glass. A symphony in stained glass is right on. Crafted over 700 years ago in AD 1250, the North Rose Window is, depending upon how you measure, the largest and most complex of them is the North Rose Window. It measures 42 feet, 12 inches across. That one window would not fit in this room, no matter which way you turned it. If you tried to put it in that wall over there, you would see only the bottom half of it. If you could pick my house up, lay the North Rose Window flat, and place my house on top of it, you would see stained glass protruding from all four sides.

A symphony in stained glass, the North Rose Window is built around the number 8. In the center, there is a large medallion with 8 smaller medallions encircling it. About halfway out—that is, from the floor to the ceiling of this room—there are 16 medallions. Half again, there are 32 more. Cathedral builders did everything with intention. Every measurement, every cut, every design. The number 8 is one more than the number 7—the number of days in which God created the cosmos. Eight is one more than that, a symbol of that which exceeds all creation: Eternity. If you turn our Arabic eight on its side, you get the symbol for infinity. That number, and that North Rose Window built upon it, points us beyond the beyond—as Buzz Lightyear says it, "To infinity, and beyond."

The North Rose Window is filled with images of Old Testament kings and prophets, all hung in orbit about a single medallion in the center. On that medallion is Jesus and his mother Mary. Jesus and Mary, both because the cathedral is named Our Lady of Paris, and as a sermon on the incarnation. All the kings and prophets of old, named and unnamed, through all eternity, find their center in the incarnate Jesus. All the kings and prophets of old, named and unnamed through all eternity, shed dazzling light into the world when properly arrayed around Christ.

Michael Stevens, the millennial-aged founder of Omaha, Nebraska-based graphic design studio Filament, says of the North Rose Window: "This symphony in glass perfectly exemplifies two concepts laid out [in the opening chapter] of John[’s Gospel]: the identity of Jesus as the Logos, the Word, and the identity of Jesus [as the Phos or Photos], as the Light." Kings and prophets. Stained glass and sunshine. Word and Light. Capital W. Capital L. That is, incidentally, what the fourth Gospel is all about. Word and Light.

"In the beginning was the Word...and...all things came into being through [or around] the Word." Right there, in the center. "The light shines in the darkness...the darkness does not overcome the light...it is a light for all people." Especially if you're standing inside the north transept of Notre Dame's utterly massive stone walls.

The Gospel According to John is different than the other three. It sets its own course. Rather than following Mark's lead as Matthew and Luke do, John has its own narrative structure built around a pair of names for Jesus: Logos, or Word, and Phos, or Light. The fourth Gospel shuffles the stories told in the other three, leaves some out, adds some in, all to build an image with Word and Light at its center. If you know that and hold on to that, then John 1:43-51 sparkles. In this story, Jesus is calling disciples. He is calling order out of chaos by creating sacred koinonia—sacred community—in a hard world. "All things came into being through him," John 1:3 just told us, "What has come into being in [or around] him is life, and the life was the light of all people." A confusing phrase, John shows us exactly what that looks like:

The next day Jesus...found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."  
Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We have found him..."  
Nathaniel said..."Can anything good come from Nazareth," and Philip said, "Come and see."

Now remember that in the Genesis story that John 1 draws on, God doesn't paint or mold or breath or think the world into being. God speaks the world into being, and here's Philip and Nathaniel walking toward the Light of the World...and Jesus speaks a world into being:

When Jesus saw...he said... "Here is a genuine Israelites in whom there is no deceit."  
Nathaniel asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" and Jesus replied, "I saw you under the fig tree..."  
Nathaniel replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Notice: Just like the others him, Nathaniel calls Jesus, "Rabbi." It means "Teacher," but what it really means is "I'm in. I'm now your disciple." But none of those before him said what he said next. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Remember when in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Peter offered his confession? Remember what he said? "You are the Messiah," Mark and Luke tell it, and Matthew adds, "the Son of the living God." This is that, in John.

"You are God's Son," Nathaniel says. And Jesus answers, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you...? You will see greater things than these."

And then, the voice changes. Jesus' voice. The word "you" is singular there, but it becomes plural in the next verse. "Very truly, I tell y'all, y'all will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man!"

Mercy. No wonder Jesus was always in trouble. Jesus just likened his disciples to Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, who was chosen and whose decedents will be more numerous than the stars for the good of the world. It's Jacob's dream—the one with the ladder in it. John the Baptist just testified that he had already seen it. "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." That's in verse 32. Jesus is saying that Nathaniel and the other disciples will too, in spades. The North Rose Window. The Gospel of John. Their sermon is: When human beings recognize and realize Christ as [Logos, Word], and [Phos, Light], God creates. Creates Koinonia, sacred community.

The year was 1942. The place was Sumpter County, Georgia, a rural, south-central county conspicuously sharing its name with the South Carolina fort over which the American Civil War was started. Two couples, Mabel and Martin England and Florence and Clarence Jordan joined together. Martin and Clarence were both Georgia farmers and ordained ministers and professors, and they had an idea so crazy it could have only come from the New Testament Gospels. They started a farm. Not just any farm. A farm that was meant to be "a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God." Think of it as a southern Baptist monastery. Members who joined the farm divested their wealth and joined a "common purse." With Christ in the center of their vision, they were able to envision the kingdom of God right there in Sumpter County, 1942: an interracial community in which blacks and whites could work and live together in partnership. Farm members, visitors, and neighbors worked, worshipped, and ate together. They attended Bible studies and help summer youth camps. When resources allowed, the farm hired seasonal help, paying black and white workers the same wages. In Georgia. In 1942.

Now those were some courageous Baptists. Their Jesus-centered vision aligned and illumined all the kings and prophets of old and created community all around them, but not without blowback. The prevailing Jim Crow culture challenged the farm. Many citizens of Sumpter County, Georgia—good church-going citizens, I'm sure—challenged the farm. The Chamber of Commerce—undoubtedly made up of those same folks—organized a boycott of the farm in the mid-1950s, and demanded the farm be disbanded and they sell off their property. In other words: Get out of town by sundown, or else. When they didn't, the KKK showed up. Dynamite spelled the end of the farms roadside produce stand. Shots were fired into the farm buildings. And a 70-car motorcade drove to the farm as an act of intimidation. Farm members bore these acts, for years, nonviolently. They wrote editorials. They maintained unarmed watches. To survive, they created a mail-order catalog to sell the farm's pecans and peanuts. Their first marketing slogan: "Help us ship the nuts out of Georgia!"

Clarence Jordan died of a heart attack at age 57, in his writing shed near the "Bottom Garden." Many farm members suffered terribly. Their efforts outlived them all. Housing. Death row. Activism. Prisons. Education. Conservation. Habitat for Humanity. Clarence Jordan's nephew Hamilton went on to serve as President Jimmy Carter's White House Chief of Staff in the late 70s. In 2005, the State of Georgia designated the farm a State Historic Site, and in 2008, it received the Community of Christ International Peace Award. The farm is still there, in Americus, Sumpter County, Georgia today.

What gave ordinary people—farmers—such courage? Well, I think it was what the rose window and the Gospel of John said. Jesus in the center, all the rest arrayed around the incarnate Christ, lighting up their lives. Where else do you find the courage to stare down dynamite and bullets and Klan hoods for your black and brown and white sisters and brothers and friends? It has to be the Word, the Light.

It has to be because the farm has a name. Of all things, Clarence Jordan and Martin England could have called a farm, they called it Koinonia. They called it "sacred community."

I'm going to teach you a New Testament Greek word today. *Metanoia*.

No, you didn't zone out already and miss the preacher talking about things that annoy ya. *Metanoia*.

Come to think of it, perhaps I was talking about things that can annoy ya. This little New Testament Greek word has given me fits in my study this week. As I dug in and around this word, I found a history lesson, a political lesson, and a theological lesson. This is the third rewrite of this sermon that hopefully means I don't sound like a professor of old standing and reading an academic paper at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

*Metanoia*. In 1611, something happened in the world of Jewish and Christian faith that had only happened a couple of times before on equal magnitude. The Bible was rendered into the *lingua franca*—the common language—of an empire. By royal commission, in 1611, the Authorized Version was published in the British Empire for use in the Church of England. It was the first English translation of the Bible—or at least the first that mattered to most. A couple of successions prior to King James I, King Henry VIII fell out with the Pope. He wanted a divorce, and when he didn't get one, he founded his own church, the Church of England, with himself rather than the Pope as its head. Anglicanism was born and as a result of the reach of the British Navy upon whose empire the sun never set, there were Anglican churches the world over, overnight. They looked a lot like their Roman Catholic siblings. Mass. Eucharist. Deep liturgical traditions and soaring cathedrals. And while Henry the VIII was motivated by his marriage and his power struggles with the papacy, his successors carried on with Anglicanism. When the sun rose on the time of King James I, it was time for the Church of England to have a translation of its own, in its own tongue. 1611. The Authorized Version. Authorized by the British crown rather than the papal throne; authorized for use in Anglican churches the world over. Through various revisions and amendments, the Authorized Version also gradually lost its original name for another: the King James Version. The most influential English translation of the Bible ever made, in part because it was the first and in part because it was backed by the empire that shaped the world into what it still is today.

*Metanoia*. As I wrestled with this word this week like Jacob wrestling on the banks of the Jabbock, that history revisited me. Why? Because as a student of the Bible, I take the King James Version seriously enough to read it critically, and frankly, it does a bad job with today's Gospel Lesson. Don't get wrong: there's no more beautiful English reading of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in the world than that of King James' scholars, but always remember that King James' scholars translated for King James. That's hardly the definition of academic freedom. King James I was busy conquering the world. King James I was busy enslaving people and exterminating people. And today's Gospel Lesson, Mark 1:14-20, and really the whole first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, is inconvenient to a monarch with such ambitions. You see, the first chapter of Mark does set forth a vision of a kingdom, but not that of King James. The history lesson becomes a political lesson as well when one realizes that every act of translation is to some degree or another political. Including the King James Version. If you know the history, you can't really miss it. Don't get me wrong, there are few versions of the Beatitudes as beautiful as those of the King James Version, but always remember that King James' scholars translated for King James.

*Metanoia*. Maybe you did zone out this time, but no, the preacher didn't say "that'll really annoy ya." Then again, the way that King James' scholars chose to render this little New Testament Greek word can annoy ya. I get why they did it. They worked for the British Crown. Their church was headed by that crown. With all that was Imperial Britain in the 1600s, I get why they did it. But it misses the mark. Not by a mile, but by just enough to mess up our theology.

*Metanoia* is the New Testament Greek word in Mark 1:15 that the King James Version translates as the English word "repent." As the white-covered, orange-gilded gift and award King James Version that Mamaw Ruby gave me for VBS in 1993 reads: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." I looked that word up this week. Not *metanoia*—well, I looked that word up too—but the "repent." What I found was an English word that has a lot to do with feelings. "To feel remorse, contrition, or self-reproach." "To feel such regret..." "Feeling or expressing remorse for one's misdeeds or sins." "Feeling regret or sorrow..." Feelings dominate the meanings of the English word "repent."

But not so with the Greek word *metanoia*. "A change of mind," says the old Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New

Testament. "The change of mind of those who have begun to abhor their errors and misdeeds and have determined to enter upon a better course of life." Repent prioritizes feelings of remorse and contrition. You have to dig deep to find "change" there.

*Metanoia*, though it may include feelings, clearly prioritizes change. "A change of mind." "The change of mind of those who have begun to abhor their errors and misdeeds and have determined to enter upon a better course of life."

I get why King James' scholars chose "repent" for this Greek word. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." If you're translating for the conquering King and kingdom, you don't call people to "enter upon a better course of life" right after you say "the kingdom of God is at hand." That's all fine and good, as long as you remember whose kingdom commissioned this translation.

From start to finish, the Common English Bible does a better job with Mark 1:15 than the King James Version, and the NIV, and the RSV, and the NRSV, and the NASB, and the ESV—all deeply reverential toward the KJV. The Common English Bible sees the history, sees the politics, of the KJV precedent and goes a different way. It translates *metanoia* correctly. "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"

It translates the phrases before and after it better, too, but there's only room for so much in one sermon. *Metanoia* does not mean to wallow. *Metanoia* does not mean to *feel* sorry or to *emote* about it. *Metanoia* means, as the Common English Bible says well in English, to "change your hearts and lives."

Beloved, we serve a God of mercy, a Gospel of grace. I understand why King James' scholars chose "repent." If you work for King James, you sure don't want to call people to "change their hearts and lives" right after you say "the kingdom of God is at hand." But that is precisely what Jesus is doing.

I titled this sermon "Trust This Good News." It's straight out of the Gospel Lesson, right after *metanoia*. You might be wondering how in the world we do that in a world that is so deeply flawed—cruel, violent, hateful. How in the world do we "Trust This Good News" in a world like this? I want to suggest to you today that that work begins "changing your hearts and lives," and that *metanoia* begins when we take honest stock of all the allegiances that we hold in our hearts—overt and subtle—and begin to put them aside for the kingdom of God. *Metanoia* doesn't mean feel bad for. It means change. Change your habits regarding news. Social media. Careless or cruel words. "Enter upon a better course of life" with regard to your patriotism. Your nationalism. Your exceptionalism. *Metanoia* here means to change one's mind, heart, life. Jesus is saying that peace is found in Trusting the Gospel, and that trusting the Gospel comes through *metanoia*. It comes through sifting out those hidden idols, those hidden loyalties, those hidden allegiances within our minds and hearts that steal us from embracing God's kingdom, and steal from us the peace that comes from trusting God's kingdom above all else.

*Metanoia* is more than repentance. It is change. Change of loyalties. Change of allegiance. Change of team. *Metanoia* is saying, "I'm putting first things first, and that means God's kingdom above all others." In every habit. In every moment. Every day.

What does that look like? Well, that's exactly the question the rest of the Gospel of Mark sets out to answer. So: *metanoia!* Change your hearts and lives! Read on and "Trust This Good News."

*Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
Daughter Jerusalem.  
Zephaniah 3:14, 17*



**Beth C. Parker**

*I praise the LORD—  
let the suffering listen and rejoice.  
I sought the LORD and he answered me.  
He delivered me from all my fears.  
Psalm 34:2, 4*

One of my favorite anthems, written by Mark Hayes, is based on these two scripture passages. I know, you think I have hundreds of favorite anthems. I guess it is true. I love choral music. I love singing it and listening to it. Lately, I've only been listening to it. Maybe this summer it will change?

I recently ordered a new copy of Jack Pennington's book, *Whatever Became of Grace?*. New cover, same great book. I am reading it again. It has made me expand my thoughts of grace. It isn't about me, it's about God. In the beginning of the book Jack says:

God looks at each of us and says,  
"It's not because of you that I bless you.  
It's because of me.  
I choose to look at my children and say,  
'I'm in your corner.  
You're the apple of my eye. I love you.  
Let's go make the future better than the past.  
Trust me to do that for you.'"

We come to worship each week. Our hymns and prayers speak to God with our praise and confession. We read scripture and hear sermons. We plan and prepare for our praise to God. With all the preparation we do, do we leave room for God to give us grace and show God's love to us?

Exult--- to feel or show triumphant elation or jubilation. We exalt God, and God exults over us with love and grace and song. God wants to show us jubilation. God wants us to feel God's great love for us. The Lord God is exulting over you in song!

I hope you will remember that God continually shows us grace and love. Say it every day. In the midst of all we are experiencing right now God is with us. I hope you will read the words of the anthem and even search

for it on YouTube. (Lake Ave Sanctuary Choir is one of the best.) The anthem is special to me and I hope you also find meaning in its words.

### **And the Father Will Dance**

*by Mark Hayes*

*And the Father will dance over you in joy!  
He will take delight in whom He loves.  
Is that a choir I hear, singing the praises of God?  
No, the Lord God Himself is exulting o'er you in song!  
And He will joy over you in song;  
And He will joy over you in song.*

*My soul will make its boast in God,  
For He has answered all my cries,  
His faithfulness in me is as sure as the dawn of a new day.*

*Awake my soul! Awake, my soul, and sing!  
Let my spirit rejoice, Let my spirit rejoice,  
Let my spirit rejoice in God!*

*Sing, O daughter of Zion, with all of your heart!  
Cast away fear for you have been restored!  
Put on the garment of praise as on a festival day.  
Join with the Father in glorious, jubilant song!*

*And He will joy over you in song;  
And He will joy over you in song.  
And the Father will dance over you in joy!  
He will take delight in whom He loves.  
Is that a choir I hear, singing the praises of God?  
No, the Lord God Himself is exulting o'er you in song!*

*God rejoices over you, God rejoices over you,  
God rejoices over you in song!*



k

First Baptist Church,

I write here at the end of the month to celebrate one among us. I've consulted the Epistle of St. Bill to the Church at Middlesboro. Her name appears twice in the listing of staff members, both instances under the title Organists. From 1959 to 1970, and then from 1973 to Present. Of course, "Present" then meant 1989. It's now 2021, and Janet Matthews has been playing the organ at First Baptist Church for 62 years. In case you're wondering, Herman's name appears two lines below hers, under the title Pianists, 1959 to "Present."

An average run for an FBC Middlesboro pastor is about 5 years—and that's rounding up. Old Rev. Everette Gill didn't even get a hyphen; Bill's book lists your second pastor's tenure as "1892." As ministers of music go, Beth Parker is record-breaking at 16 years. Bill Hunter, Phil Akers, and Cherry Stamper all boast respectable, multi-decade tenures. But as impressive and rare as 20 and 30-year tenures are, only God has been on staff at First Baptist Church longer than organist Janet Matthews.

Truth be told, no one even remembers which month of 1959 Janet and Herman started their work among us, so we decided a few years ago to celebrate it in the month of the new year, in January. Celebrations are important to me, and I believe the lifeblood of a community. A couple of Sundays ago, those of us who gathered in-person in the room thanked and applauded Janet, who plays in the 11 AM service. We celebrated her and celebrated us, thanks be to God.

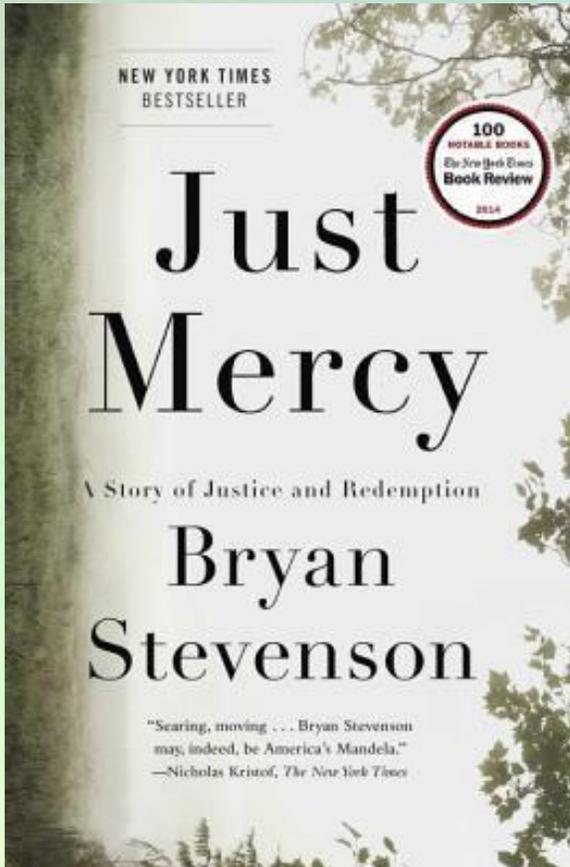
Before January slips away, I want to say in writing on behalf of all the church (even Baptist pastors are permitted that privilege every once in a while): Thank you, Janet. Thank you for 62 years on the organ bench. Thank you for literally thousands of offerings you've made to God in worship through those manuals, pedals, and pipes.

We love you.

-Rev. Zach Bay, and all of First Baptist Church with him.

# Lenten Book Club

*First Baptist Church of Middlesboro, Kentucky*



An unforgettable true story about the potential for mercy to redeem us, and a clarion call to end mass incarceration in America — from one of the most inspiring lawyers of our time.

Bryan Stevenson was a young lawyer when he founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit law office in Montgomery, Alabama, dedicated to defending the poor, the incarcerated, and the wrongly condemned.

Just Mercy tells the story of EJI, from the early days with a small staff facing the nation's highest death sentencing and execution rates, through a successful campaign to challenge the cruel practice of sentencing children to die in prison, to revolutionary projects designed to confront Americans with our history of racial injustice.

Join us on Tuesdays at 7:00 via Zoom,  
beginning on February 9th  
and continuing through March 23.

Sign up at [surveymonkey.com/r/lentbookclub](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/lentbookclub)

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*Office Administrator*
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*Facilities Manager*
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*Child Care Coordinator*
- Phillip Akers  
*Media Coordinator*
- Janet Matthews  
*Organist*
- Teresa Brown  
*Organist/Pianist*
- Bonnie Daniels  
*Pianist*
- Rev. John E. Pennington, Jr.  
*Pastor Emeritus*

## Church Announcements

# Take a peek at our new Digital Newsletter



visit [flipsnack.com/FBCmiddlesboro](http://flipsnack.com/FBCmiddlesboro) to view  
an online flipbook version of the newsletter!

Beginning in April, a link to the online newsletter  
will be sent via email at the beginning of each month.

**If you'd like to continue receiving a paper copy of the newsletter**

you must opt in by visiting

**[surveymonkey.com/r/FBCnewsletter](http://surveymonkey.com/r/FBCnewsletter)**

or by calling the church office.

**If you'd prefer the digital newsletter** and you currently receive  
the weekly prayer list email, you don't need to do anything!

**Don't know if we have your email address?**

You may also use the Survey Monkey link or call the office  
to provide us with a new or updated email address.