

Spiritual Renewal

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 December 2019

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0:00] Good morning to all of you. I hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving. Hopefully it's been made abundantly clear by now that this is the first Sunday of the season of Advent. That's why there are some differences in our worship that will remain until the Christmas season begins.

But the season of Advent is a time of preparation. It's a time when we look forward to the celebration of Christmas and what that means, the celebration of the coming of God's Son into the world.

And so we focus during Advent on all the reasons why Christmas is such good news for the world. And as a part of that, during the season of Advent, we create space to acknowledge all that is not right with the world.

We create space to grieve the things that are broken and to contemplate all of the unanswered questions and the unfulfilled longings that are a part of human life.

So we don't whitewash. We don't give in to naive optimism. We take time to acknowledge the pain in this room.

[1:08] Right? So if I were to ask you to take out a piece of paper and to take a few minutes and to write down what are the most pressing concerns in the world right now? What are the biggest challenges that we're facing?

I wonder what you would write down. Maybe it would be something like climate change and the future of our world. Maybe it would be something like all those who still live in poverty.

Maybe it would be the ongoing threat of war. Maybe it would be the ongoing realities of inequality right here in Washington, D.C. and around the world.

Maybe it would be government corruption either here or abroad. I don't know what you would write down. But all of those would be things that I would probably consider writing down. And then if I were to ask you to get a little more personal and to kind of go further down on your piece of paper and to write down what are the most pressing concerns in your life?

What are the things that are weighing on you right now? I wonder what it would be. Maybe for some of us it would be seasonal depression. The holidays can be tremendously challenging for some people.

[2:16] Going to see your family, if you have family to visit for Thanksgiving, can be mixed. It can be kind of good but it can also awaken and open old wounds and tear off old scabs.

If you've lost people and are grieving those losses, holidays can be tremendously painful. So maybe it's seasonal depression. Maybe it's chronic pain.

Maybe it's debt. Maybe it's school debt. Maybe it's a struggling marriage. Maybe it's loneliness. Maybe it's job stress. Maybe you're contemplating a massive transition.

All of these are things that we kind of bring in the door when we come here. And Christianity would say that all of these challenges exist because the world is not as it should be.

That life is not as it should be. And this is primarily because our relationships have broken down. And Christianity would say that you can take all of these challenges and fit them into sort of four categories of relationships that have broken down as a result of what Christians call the fall.

[3:29] Which we're going to talk more about in just a little while. But as we talk about these four kinds of relationships, we can think of it as sort of four concentric circles. At the very center, our relationship with God is broken.

And that's what we're going to talk about this morning. But then also, our relationship with ourself is broken. We're fragmented. A lot of times we say and do things and we have no idea why we said or did them.

We're motivated by drives and needs that are outside of our awareness. There's also a brokenness that exists in our relationships with other people.

Marriages fall apart. Friendships fade. People live for years and years and years unable to form meaningful relationships. There is racism. There is injustice.

There is a conflict between the genders. There is all manner of relational brokenness there. And then finally, our relationship with the natural world is broken. And all the anxieties we have about the future of our climate and the future of our environment are very real.

[4 : 36] Our understanding of our role in the world and our vocation is broken. So all of these relationships are relationships where Christians believe we need renewal. And so this is what we're going to be focusing on during the season of Advent.

Each week, we're going to take one of these areas of relationship and we're going to talk about what the brokenness looks like. And then we're going to talk about why Jesus offers such tremendous hope for renewal in our relationship with God, ourselves, others, and the world that God has made and entrusted to us.

So this week, very appropriately, we're going to be starting with our relationship with God. And so we're going to be doing this by looking at Mark chapters 1 and 2 beginning in verse 40 and we'll go through chapter 2 verse 17.

And we see in these chapters three encounters that Jesus has that teach us about why our relationship with God is broken. It's because of something called sin.

And sin has a lot of baggage and it's often misunderstood. So hopefully we'll leave with a little better understanding of what Christians mean when we actually talk about sin. So we're going to talk about that and then we're going to talk about how Jesus renews our relationship with God.

[5 : 52] So in other words, we're going to be talking about spiritual renewal. So these three encounters are as follows. The first encounter shows us the problem of sin.

This is an encounter with a paralyzed man. The problem of sin. The second encounter is an encounter that Jesus has with a man who has leprosy. And that encounter shows us our inability to deal with sin.

And then lastly, we'll see the encounter that Jesus has with Levi, the tax collector. And this will show us God's answer to sin. So the problem of sin, our inability to deal with sin, and God's answer to sin.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. Lord, were it not for Christmas, these would be merely words. But because you have come and because you are here, because you are Emmanuel, God with us, we know that we can open your word and trust that you will speak living words.

The words we most need to hear. We pray that you would do just that, Lord, for our good and for your glory. In your son's holy name. Amen. So let's look at this first encounter, which shows us something about the problem of sin.

[7 : 06] The first encounter we're going to look at, actually, you may have missed this in the reading. It actually happens at Jesus' own home. We don't often think of Jesus having a home, but it says here, word spread that Jesus was at home.

Now, this was most likely a place that he spent most of his time when he was in Capernaum. It might have been Peter's house where Peter and his family lived. But nevertheless, it says Jesus is home, which gives a little context to the events, I think.

And so Jesus is at home in Capernaum, and he's teaching, and the place is packed. It's packed shoulder to shoulder, standing room only. And there are some men who want to bring their paralyzed friend in hopes that Jesus might heal him.

But the only way that they can get their friend to Jesus is to climb up on the top of the house, which most likely had a kind of thatched roof, and to tear a hole in the roof, and then to lower the man down. If you recognize that this is actually Jesus' home, you know, it makes it a little more interesting.

Right? And so Jesus looks up, and he sees this man being lowered down, and he sees the faith of these men, and then he looks at the man on the mat, and he says, Son, your sins are forgiven.

[8 : 22] Which is interesting for a number of reasons. Right? Maybe he's just talking about the sin of tearing a hole in his roof, but I don't think that he's just talking about that. I think he's talking about much more here.

But the most interesting thing is that it's very obvious to everyone in the room that this man did not come to Jesus looking for absolution. He came so that he could walk again.

And yet Jesus looks and he says, Son, your sins are forgiven. So what's going on here? Well, it's not that Jesus doesn't care about this man's disability.

In fact, he does care. And as we know, a bit later in the story, Jesus actually heals the man, and he picks up his mat, and he walks home. But before Jesus heals him, he forgives him.

And what this does is it makes it very clear that this man's deepest need is not to be healed of his paralysis. His deepest need is to be forgiven.

[9 : 20] It's to be reconciled to God. It's to have everything that stands between him and God removed and dealt with. It would be like going to a doctor because you have a persistent cough.

And you go to the doctor because you want cough medicine so that you won't cough anymore. And upon examination, the doctor discovers that you, in fact, have a tumor in your lung.

And it's not that the cough doesn't matter, but the tumor is much more severe. The cough is something that you were aware of. It was something that was nagging you, something that was always before your face.

And that's the felt need that you had. The tumor you didn't even know was there. You didn't feel it. There was no indication that you could tell that it was even a problem.

Only when the doctor examined you did you realize that you have a much more severe condition that needs to be dealt with and is likely contributing to your cough. And so in the same way, sin, when we talk about it, sin is the tumor in the chest of humanity.

[10 : 27] It's the tumor in the chest of humanity. It's the thing that sits underneath all of the other problems of the world. And in Genesis chapter 3, we see where this comes from.

You read the creation account. God made human beings to love him and to love one another and to take care of the world. But human beings chose instead to try to become like God.

They wanted to be independent. They wanted to be autonomous. They wanted to be able to decide for themselves the meaning of the world around them. They wanted to be able to decide for themselves the difference between right and wrong, good and evil.

And as a result, this broke our relationship with God. And so what we believe as Christians is that everybody is born cut off from the God who made them.

Which means everyone is born cut off from the source of life and vitality in the universe. And so we believe that this is the reason that we have all other kinds of sickness in the world.

[11 : 35] Because we are cut off from that source of life and vitality. This is the reason that we live in a world where people get paralyzed. And have to be carried around on mats.

This is the reason that we live in a world where marriages fall apart. This is the reason we live in a world where there is infertility and miscarriage. This is the reason we live in a world where there is racism and poverty and war.

This is the reason why from the moment we are born we begin slowly to die. It's because we are cut off from the source of life and vitality in the universe.

And so this encounter shows us that our deepest problem is sin. We may not feel it. We may not be aware of it.

I was talking to somebody just a few days ago. Not a Christian. But the topic of sin came up. And she was asking a bit about what sin is and what I think about that.

[12 : 33] Because she said it's a very archaic term. And it sounds very judgmental to talk about sin. It sounds very, you know, I get uncomfortable with the idea of sin. Most people this day and age don't like to talk about sin.

We think of the Puritans. We think of a kind of archaic religion. And yet I have yet to meet a person who doesn't recognize that there is something not right about the world.

And the word for that, that we would use, would be sin. A broken relationship with God. And any approach to fixing ourselves, any approach to fixing the world, that does not recognize the tumor is simply going to be a band-aid.

It's going to be a cough suppressant. It's going to be an aspirin. When what we really need is surgery. So this leads to our second encounter. Which is an encounter that actually in Mark's gospel happens before this encounter.

It happens in chapter 1, verse 40 through 45. But the second encounter that we're going to look at is the encounter that Jesus has with another man who has leprosy.

[13:38] And this shows us why the problem of sin is one that we cannot deal with on our own. We are fundamentally unable to deal with it. So in Mark 1, 40 to 45, a man with leprosy comes to Jesus, begging to be healed.

Now here's the thing that we need to understand about leprosy. Leprosy, if you had leprosy as a person, you were not allowed into towns. You were not allowed into the temple to worship. Because if you had leprosy, you were considered to be unclean. And I don't just mean contagious. This wasn't just about a health issue. You were considered to be religiously unclean. Spiritually unclean. And that uncleanness was considered to be contagious. So if you have leprosy and I were to touch you, your spiritual contagion would then infect me.

And I would become unclean like you. And so there were lots of regulations for people with leprosy to keep them separate from the general population. They lived as outcasts. And the focus of this story, we need to understand, the focus of this story is on the clean, unclean distinction.

[14:52] Because the priests at the temple had no ability to cure leprosy. They had no rites or rituals or medicinal practices to cure it. A priest's job was simply to declare clean or unclean.

And so if somebody was suspected of having leprosy, they would be brought before the priests. The priests would examine them. If it turned out that they did have leprosy, they would declare that person to be unclean.

And from that moment on, that person would live as an outcast. They would be cast out of normal society, so to speak. From that point forward, that person with leprosy would probably have very little human contact.

It was a very lonely life. So this is why, after Jesus heals the man, Jesus specifically says, he says, don't go and tell the public about this, because once the word gets out, as we see, Jesus finds it very difficult to travel anywhere because the people are thronging around him.

He says, don't go brag to your friends about this, but do go to the temple and do present yourself according to all that Moses has commanded you. Why? What's Jesus' primary concern here?

[16:12] He says, I will heal you. Be clean. And he says, now you need to go to the temple. Why? Because it was the priest's job to declare somebody an outcast, unclean, or to declare that they were now clean and could rejoin the community.

And so Jesus' primary concern is that this person who has been living as an outcast be reinstated as an active member of the Jewish community.

So he says, go because there was a very lengthy involved process of reinstating somebody as being clean. And Jesus says, I've made you clean. So that you can rejoin the community.

You will be clean again and you will live like a clean person. Now there's so much in this story that we could focus on. One of my favorite details is the fact that when this man begs Jesus to heal him, Jesus says, I will.

And Jesus could have healed him with a thought. And yet Jesus reaches out and he touches this man. And I love that detail because it shows the compassion of Jesus.

[17:12] This man has probably not been touched by another human being in years. And as we may know, human contact is essential. It's essential. People wither and die without human contact.

And so Jesus reaches out and he touches this man. It's purely an act of compassion. There are lots of details like that that we could focus on. But the thing that I want to focus on is that this story shows us why sin is the kind of problem that human beings cannot solve on our own.

As I said, the priest cannot cure leprosy. All the priest can do is to determine clean or unclean. All the priest can do is to draw a line.

And in the same way, we as human beings cannot cure sin. All we can do is to declare people either clean or unclean.

And that may sound odd to you, but I would suggest that we see this impulse all around us in society. I recognize that something is wrong with the world, but I'm powerless to solve the problem.

[18:17] But what I can do is to determine the difference according to my standard between who I would consider to be clean and the people that I would consider to be unclean. And this is a fundamental human religious impulse that you'll find even in the most strident atheist.

The internet has made new forms of public shaming possible that were never possible before. Every week, there are new examples of people who said the wrong thing or did the wrong thing or something from their past resurfaces.

And those people are declared to be unclean. They are cast out. They are excluded from normal society.

And they are shunned and ignored by all of their peers. There's the rise among high school and college students you may have read about cancel culture. There's debate over whether this is in fact really happening or whether it's more of a joke.

My sense is from what I've heard and read that it's a little bit of both. That there are places where this is actually taken very seriously. And someone, if they make a misstep or say the wrong thing or identify it as being potentially harmful or saying or doing things that are offensive, they will be canceled.

[19 : 33] Meaning they are shunned and ignored by all of their peers. And there are accounts of people who are deeply traumatized by this because they don't know that it's happened. All of a sudden, they begin to figure out that nobody is talking to them or interacting with them in any way, shape, or form.

They've been canceled. Now, best case scenario, this is a way for the powerless to call out those in power. It democratizes things such that anyone can have a voice and hold anyone else accountable.

That's the argument for it. But what I would say is all too often, it devolves into just another power play. It's a kind of mob justice that plays out on the internet.

And you know, it's interesting because, you know, as I read Mark, and probably as you read Mark, we think that the idea that just because somebody has a disease, they would be considered unclean, we think that that's horrible.

How could any society operate that way? Just because you have a disease, you're considered unclean and you're treated as an outcast? And yet I wonder what they would think if they were to look at our society and they would realize that somebody is considered unclean simply because of the way they think, simply because of their beliefs, simply because they hold to unpopular opinions.

[20 : 48] They're treated as unclean. It's interesting in our society to see more and more and more as there is the interplay and sort of exchange of ideas that is now possible on the internet and as we're coming into contact potentially with so many different ways of thinking and different points of view, it's a kind of intellectual germophobia that has developed.

Right? People treat going into the internet like going into a really dirty public bathroom. You know, and it's like, and the possibility that I might come in contact with another way of thinking or another set of beliefs that might challenge me or offend me or disagree with me is almost treated like a germ that I need to isolate myself from.

And so increasingly people's tendency is to quarantine themselves so that they don't come in contact with unclean ideas lest they become unclean.

And most importantly, as we look at the issues that most people care about, as we look at the issues that most often cause somebody to be ostracized or publicly called out, issues that we all want to see ended, issues like racism, issues like sexual assault, the hard thing about all of this is that these issues cannot be cured by public shaming.

You will never cure racism by publicly shaming people any more than leprosy can be cured by public shaming. Right? It's not a cure.

[22 : 24] What we can do, all we can do is to create a culture where people learn how to curate everything they say and do so as to appear clean.

We can create a culture where people are very good at acting like they're woke, acting like they're enlightened, acting like they're on the right side of history. But these issues are not actually dealt with.

They're simply hidden. They're buried. Unless the tumor of sin is removed, it's all cosmetic. There is no cure.

And when it comes to sin, all human beings can do is to divide clean from unclean. And simply put, we need a better solution. We need a better answer.

And so this leads us to the third and final encounter that we'll look at this morning in Mark chapter 2, verses 13 to 17, God's answer to sin. And this third encounter, let's just be honest, this third encounter is a bit different from the other two.

[23 : 28] Most people, if they look, even in the first century, if you looked at a man who had leprosy, you would feel pity. You would feel compassion. If you looked at a man who's paralyzed on a mat, you would feel pity. You would feel compassion.

But when you saw a tax collector, there would be no pity. There would be no compassion. Because tax collectors were Jews who had essentially sided with the Roman occupiers. And they worked for Rome. And they would go around and collect taxes from their own people. And they would often collect more money than was actually required to pad their own pockets. So they were often very corrupt and they were seen as traitors to their people. They used their power that many believed was gained through betrayal to abuse and exploit their own people. So think of someone like Bernie Madoff. Think of someone like Harvey Weinstein. Right? These are the kind of images that would help us understand a tax collector in first century perspective. [24 : 35] People who use their power to exploit and abuse other people. This is how people would have seen Levi. Levi. And Levi doesn't just need to be healed of a disability.

He doesn't just need to be healed of a skin condition. Levi needs an entirely new identity. Levi needs to be rebuilt from the ground up.

And this is what Jesus gives him when Jesus looks at him and he says, follow me. He's not just healing a disease. He's saying, I want you to leave everything and I want you to come and I want you to attach yourself to me.

And when Jesus calls someone to be his disciple, he's doing a couple of things. First, he's saying, from now on, I want you to belong to me. From now on, in other words, no one will look at Levi and think of him as a traitor.

No one will look at Levi and think of him as someone who betrayed or abused his power or exploited people. From this point forward, Jesus is saying, I want you to be associated with me. When people look at you, they will see you as a follower of me.

[25 : 38] My identity will become your identity. And that leads to the second thing Jesus is doing when he says, follow me, he's calling Levi to become like him. He's saying, I want you to live with me.

I want you to do what I do. I want you to speak how I speak. I want you to go where I go. I want you to so meld your identity with mine that we become interchangeable.

Right? It's like somebody learning to dance and you watch the person and you follow the moves and slowly but surely it becomes more natural to you and more natural to you until it is no longer choreography that you're following.

It becomes the way you dance. It becomes the way you move because your body has learned how to do it and it has become innate. And Jesus is saying, I want you to follow me as closely as possible and become in every way like me.

And this is what a disciple is. So God's answer to sin, just to kind of make the point clear, we often as kind of, you know, 20th and 21st century evangelical Christians, many of us kind of came out of that background, we often think of God's answer to sin as simply being about forgiveness, which it is.

[26 : 48] That's the core of it. But it doesn't end there. God's answer to sin in the world isn't just to forgive people, it's discipleship. That's God's answer because God says, you don't just need to be forgiven, you need a new identity.

You need to relearn how to be a human being. So come and follow me. So we look at Jesus, Jesus lived the life that we should have lived, Jesus died the death that we deserve to die on the cross, Jesus rose from death, but when Jesus rose from death, he didn't just say, okay, I've dealt with your sin, you're all forgiven, have a nice life.

Right? What Jesus did was to immediately establish the church. He established the church. And what is the church? Why is the church even here? You might think of the church like a spiritual rehab center.

This is a place of spiritual rehabilitation where people like Levi, people like me, people like you, can spend the rest of our lives relearning how to be human beings by following Jesus.

After surgery, you go to physical therapy. Right? And say you had your legs operated on, well now you have to go to physical therapy to relearn how to walk again. When we come to Jesus and Jesus declares that we have been made clean, we then have to learn how to be a human being again.

[28 : 13] And we'll spend the rest of our lives learning how to be a human being again, which means learning how to love God above all else. Learning how to love one another as God loves us. That takes a lifetime.

So another way to say it is this, Jesus frees us from the penalty of sin the moment we come to him. And he promises that one day we'll be freed from the presence of sin. Sin will no longer exist. But until that day, we are still subject to and influenced by the power of sin.

And it's a hard thing to resist. And we can't do it alone. It takes the support of a church to fight against that. So as we enter the Advent season together, and as I said at the beginning, we take time to focus on and remember why the world is so broken and why we need Christmas, why we need the coming of God's Messiah.

It's because our deepest problem is sin, whether we feel it or not. Our deepest problem is sin. It's because we as human beings are not able to deal with sin on our own.

And it's because we need Jesus Christ not just to forgive our sin, but to begin to show us an entirely new way of being human. And so now that we've talked about this, in the future weeks, we will talk about the implications for this.

[29 : 38] We'll talk about how this then leads to our own renewal, right, the renewal of self. We'll talk about then how this leads to the renewal that we can experience in our relationships as Christians are ministers of reconciliation in the world.

And we'll talk about how this restores our relationship with the natural world. These are all topics that we're going to cover. But the point I want to make this morning is it all has to start with Jesus and our willingness not only to ask him to forgive us, but our willingness to leave everything to go and follow him.

In other words, and this is the last point I'll make, I want to draw out one brief implication. If we care, and listen to this very carefully, if we care about things like social justice, if we care about things like overcoming racism, if we care about issues like climate change and how to ensure a sustainable future for our children, if we care about those issues and we're really serious about making progress on solving those problems, then among our highest priorities we should have evangelism and discipleship.

Those should be among our highest priorities. And I say this because I think too many churches, and I've had these debates many times over the years, too many churches think and act as though it has to be one or the other.

You're either the kind of church that cares about evangelism or you're the kind of church that cares about social justice. You know, you're the kind of church that focuses on conversions or you're the kind of church that focuses on ending climate change.

[31 : 16] And you're one or the other, left or right, what's it going to be? But as I look at this and as I look at those four concentric circles, it strikes me that they need each other, that they require each other.

Because following Jesus is the way to become the kind of person the world needs. Right? It's the way to become more integrated and whole as a human being. It's the way to become more concerned about mercy and justice and ending things like racism.

It's the way to become passionate about protecting the world that God has made. All of these things flow out of discipleship. And it's interesting to note that after Jesus calls Levi to follow him, the first thing that Levi does is what?

He throws a party, invites all of his sinner, tax collector friends to the party because he wants all those people to come to know Jesus the way he does. And I would say that if we're serious about seeing this world renewed and if we're serious about the renewal of all things and if we recognize that that begins with spiritual renewal, then I think that we should all be like Levi.

The best form of advocacy in this world is evangelism. It's inviting everyone we know to come and see Jesus. And this is why Christmas is such good news for the world.

[32 : 38] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your son and we thank you for the offer that is on the table, for the taking, that we can come to you in prayer and we can do it right now and we can ask for your forgiveness and we can give our lives to you.

And Lord, I thank you that that is an invitation that's not just about us but it's your way of restoring this world. Lord, you could do it alone. You could snap your fingers and do it.

But yet, you choose to work in and through very broken, fallible human beings like us. And Lord, that's a great mystery but it does give us dignity and it gives us honor and it tells us what our purpose is.

Lord, and we thank you for that and we pray that in all of this, in all of our striving and longing for a better world, Lord, that our hope would rest firmly in you. And it's in your name, your son's name

that we pray.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.