

## **ALTARED LIFE: Expand Your Mind**

**Mark 1:9-15**

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**Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO**

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I.

Have you ever learned you were misusing a word? It was our former pastor, Doyle Sager, who, with great grace and kindness, informed me years ago after one of my first sermons that a “moot” point and a “mute” point are not the same thing. Moot refers to something unimportant or irrelevant, while mute means completely silent, which is what I wished I had been when I used “mute” instead of “moot.”

In one of my favorite movies, “The Princess Bride,” the word “inconceivable” is repeatedly used by the Sicilian criminal genius Vizzini. A bully and a narcissist, Vizzini declares “INCONCEIVABLE” whenever his plan goes awry and when what he says couldn’t possibly happen is literally happening right in front of him.

After snatching Princess Buttercup, Vizzini and his two henchmen board a ship to hide from the prince's army. One of Vizzini’s henchmen, Inigo, asks if it's possible that they are being followed. “That would be inconceivable!” Vizzini casually replies. While Inigo continues to look behind them, worried about being followed, Vizzini repeats, “As I told you, it would be absolutely, totally, and in all other ways inconceivable.”

After they realize someone is indeed following them, they go ashore and climb a rope up a steep cliff. The Man in Black, following them to rescue Princess Buttercup, follows them up the cliff, which prompts Vizzini to declare once again, “inconceivable!”

When Vizzini, Inigo, and Fezzik reach the top of the cliff, they decide to cut the rope so that the Man in Black will fall to his death. After Inigo slices the rope, and it drops to the beach below, Vizzini looks down the cliff wall only to see the Man in Black still alive, clinging to the rocks, and beginning to climb. Vizzini shouts, “He didn't fall? Inconceivable!” to which Inigo responds, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

The humor lies in the fact that, despite Vizzini's consistent use of the term, the events unfolding are not only conceivable, they are happening; though improbable, they are not impossible. Vizzini utters one more inconceivable before his death when he drinks the poison he meant for the man in black, never conceiving that his plan might backfire. He never learned to expand or change his mind about what is or is not conceivable.

II.

When was the last time you changed or expanded your mind about something or someone? Most of us may think we’re open-minded and responsive to new information. You might even feel slightly offended if I suggest today that you and I are not as open-minded as we think.

Changing our minds about something important takes time and a lot of effort. It requires empathy, vulnerability, trust, respect, humility, and courage. It's a skill, a skill most of us could improve on.

In conversations with those with whom we disagree, our default tendency is to look for an opportunity to refute rather than understand. In that moment, we want the other person to change their mind. But when was the last time we changed our mind?

III.

If it makes you feel any better, we humans have always struggled with thinking and seeing in new ways. We resist challenges to what we've always known and believed. This is true for us today and those who encountered Jesus in the first century.

Mark's Gospel doesn't waste any time. Mark spends no time on birth stories or a young Jesus ditching his parents to hang out at the temple. Mark begins chapter one, verse one with these words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ," and then, Jesus enters the scene as a man. In a few verses, Mark summarizes Jesus's baptism and subsequent temptation in the wilderness.

If we only had this one gospel, we wouldn't know of John the Baptist's protest about being unworthy to baptize Jesus. If we only had this one gospel, we wouldn't know any details about how Jesus was tempted three times by Satan in the wilderness. Of Jesus's 40-day wilderness journey, on which the 40-day season of Lent is patterned, we're told the Spirit forces Jesus into the wilderness among the wild beasts, where he is tempted by Satan and tended to by angels. Mark's account seems to focus not on details but on what these two events confirm about who Jesus is, both to others and Jesus, and how these events set the stage for what is to come.

After five quick sentences summarizing both events, Jesus exits the wilderness with an announcement on his mind and lips: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news."

In the days, months, and three years to come, this announcement has nearly everyone, including the disciples, repeating Vizzini's infamous word: "INCONCEIVABLE!" (or whatever it would be in the Greek.)

IV.

Speaking of words we use that perhaps do not mean what we think they mean, let's talk about the words *repent* and good news. The word Jesus uses in verse 15 is the Greek word *metanoia*, meaning "to expand or change your mind." There are other Greek words that we also translate "repent." But in this verse, Jesus is saying, "Repent or expand your mind about what you think the good news might be."

For those Jews listening to Jesus, they have been desperately waiting and praying for centuries for God to show up and do something about all that is wrong. They didn't think it was

inconceivable that God would do this. Even though they had moments of doubt or wondered how long, Lord, they believed God would rescue them and God's kingdom would prevail.

What was inconceivable, impossible for them to even imagine, was HOW God would do this.

The people of God believed it would happen in a certain way – the overthrow and destruction of their oppressor, the Roman Empire, the reestablishment of the earthly nation of Israel, and a return to the good old days like when King David was on the throne.

But when Jesus began teaching about the last being first, loving enemies, forgiving sinners, challenging oppressors, and about the Son of Man suffering and dying, well, they struggled to repent, to expand their minds about what they'd always believed. When Jesus called them to embrace the radical self-sacrificial way of Christ as the way God would bring about God's kingdom, Jesus encountered more resistance and rejection rather than repentance and changed minds.

Marilyn McCord Adams writes, "In Mark's Gospel, the experience of Jesus' first disciples stands as a warning: because the Twelve could not loosen their grip in advance, Golgotha became the liminal space where their old meanings crashed and burned, leaving them no choice but to despair or to beg for new ones."<sup>i</sup>

You see, the Savior of the world suffering and dying on the cross was inconceivable to the disciples. This was not how this was supposed to happen. How can God rescue them and establish a new kingdom if those in power kill him? What kind of Savior doesn't pick up the sword and fight? What kind of Savior lowers himself to wash the feet of others? What kind of Savior allows himself to be killed?

What kind of Savior? The kind of Savior who hears us proclaim, "Good News!" and responds, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

V.

["The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news."]

In our text, Jesus directs us to expand our minds and believe or fully surrender ourselves to the good news. And what is the good news according to Jesus? The good news is that the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, has come. It is near, not meaning on its way just on the outskirts of town, but right beside and among us, but we must expand our minds to see it. We must move from our finite human perspective about what a kingdom might look like, with earthly kings and fixed borders, and expand to a broader, more comprehensive, divine perspective with a heavenly King with no borders at all. At the heart of the gospel is the call to change the way that we see the world, to expand beyond our rigid boundaries and beliefs, and to begin to see things in a new way. This, too, is repentance, the repentance Jesus talks about in verse 15.

For Jesus, the good news was the ever-present realm of God with and among us, a realm far more just and generous than we could ever imagine. It was the thing Jesus talked about more than anything. The kingdom was the central heartbeat and mission of his message. He believed and announced that the kingdom of God or heaven is here. It is mentioned more than 100 times in the gospels.

Jesus says, “I know this good news is inconceivable to you but expand your mind and surrender yourself to the kingdom of God.” Then, Jesus preached, taught, and demonstrated over and over what the kingdom of God looks like. It is where loving God and loving others is the ultimate priority. It names and calls out evil; it liberates people from what enslaves them. It is like a mustard seed, so tiny it would be easy to overlook, but with the potential to be larger than life itself. It is like a pearl so lovely and rare that you would sell everything you have to possess. It’s like a treasure buried in a field, one you find when you weren’t even looking. It is like yeast, so small that it is practically invisible, and yet it can potentially bring significant growth, making the dough rise dramatically before it is baked into bread.

The kingdom might be hard for us to see sometimes, but it is near and very much good news. God at work in our lives might be hard to see sometimes, it might even feel inconceivable to us because of how messed up things are or how much we messed up. Yet, Jesus says to us, “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe.” God is with us, right now, here in the valleys of life. God’s peace, grace, mercy, freedom, justice, goodness, restoration ... it is all right here if we allow God to expand our minds and surrender ourselves to the beauty, wonder, and mystery of a world where God rules and reigns over everything, where love for God and others is our ultimate priority. And when we repent and believe, when we expand our mind and surrender our lives, the kingdom will come near.

VI.

Kate Bowler is a modern-day poet who writes powerful reflections on life and faith. She is also a Duke professor, podcaster, and New York Times best-selling author with a single mission: giving you permission to feel human. In her newest book, *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* she shares a reflection titled, “Seeing God Everywhere.” Let me share it with you today:

This world feels solid,  
through and through.  
Nothing is more obvious than  
who’s in and who’s out –  
the numbers at the bottom of these  
credit card bills,  
and the worry lines  
around our eyes and mouths.

Just ask anyone.  
Nothing is happening except headlines

and a new season of Netflix  
and the rumbling of wars, near and far.

Then we squint.

*There you are.* Shimmering at the edges  
of some extravagant act of love.

*There you are.* Quickening our steps  
toward your surprising favorites:  
the weak and poor and scared,  
the lasts-becoming firsts,  
those who can't squeeze  
through the eye of the needle.

*There you are.* Calling us strong  
when we are weak.  
Telling us to link arms  
with those who suffer.  
Explaining how justice  
will invert the order of things.

The world feels solid,  
through and through, God.  
Help me squint and see you better.<sup>ii</sup>

*There you are, God.* As we journey these 40 days in Lent, may we learn to squint, framing out the peripheral so we might see better and more clearly God's kingdom here and now. And seeing better, may our minds expand and may we fully surrender our lives to the radical self-sacrificial way of Christ. Thanks be to God.

Melissa Hatfield © 2024

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 48.

<sup>ii</sup> Kate Bowler, *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* New York: Convergent, 2024, 127.