These are not easy days in which to preach when the Gospel message has been twisted by many to undergird nationalism and self-interest. It’s hard trying to preach the expansiveness of the Kingdom of God when time’s up for many immigrants with brown or black skin. Trying to preach the love of God when politicians entrusted with power denigrate their office and entire countries using expletives. Trying to proclaim a vision of evangelism that is not about saving sinners from damnation, but modeling the diverse, beloved community that God imagines, seeking to live ethically and morally with brothers and sisters on every continent who, like us, are children of God. No, these are not easy times in which to profess our faith, but these are the times in which we live. It is for a time like this that we in the church are called to live up to the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, “We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization.”

In the words of one commentator, “Mark begins like an alarm clock, persistently declaring the time and demanding some response.” In the first 12 verses of chapter 1, Mark summarizes the ministry of John the Baptist; describes the baptism of Jesus complete with visual and sound effects; and tells of a 40 day battle between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness. This brings us to today’s reading in which we are told that John has been arrested, Jesus appears in Galilee announcing that a new age is dawning that offers new hope to the world, and concludes with the calling of four disciples who left their livelihood and families to follow Jesus.

“The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near.” The “time” to which Jesus refers is not time one marks by looking at your watch. It is a “kairos” moment, the time when all the conditions are ripe, the stars aligned, and a new arrangement for how the world will work is being revealed. Eugene Peterson in his translation, The Message, puts it this way, “Time’s up! God’s kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.”

Imagine living in Jesus’ day. The Roman Empire is everywhere. The emperor’s hands control every aspect of society. Herod, the “king of the Jews”, is a power-hungry man who might kill anyone at any time. The Temple authorities are trying to walk a tightrope of making accommodations to Rome so Israel can maintain its religious identity without too much interference. And along comes a teacher who proclaims that God’s time has come. Heaven and earth are about to be joined together. Everything is about to change. And the change won’t just be a rearranging of who sits in the seats of power. It will be a soup-to-nuts change in
which the values of love, justice, and concern for the least among us will take ascendance over power, control, and expediency.

Lee Barrett writes, “Theologians have described this new era variously,... For some it has been seen as a new situation of unconditional acceptance of sinful humanity. For others it has been seen as a time of unprecedented spiritual vitality displacing an age of stagnation. For yet others it has been seen as a new age of peace and justice healing the old order of oppression and hostility. But, however the reign of God has been envisioned, it consistently involves God’s satisfaction of the deepest human yearnings and the accomplishment of God’s purposes.”

According to Jesus, the first response required of us when the kingdom announcement is made is to repent. In my opinion the word “repent” is in need of some convalescence. We’ve made it a scary word; something that connotes “feeling bad”. And probably, the worse you feel, the better. But, I don’t think guilt is what Jesus intends when he announces, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Frederick Buechner offers a more helpful and biblically sound understanding of repentance, writing, “To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ than to the future and saying ‘Wow!’

Repentance calls us to change our lives; to turn around, take a new direction with our lives. Follow Jesus in living by God’s priorities of compassion, inclusion, and engagement with the powers that be if they would deny fullness of life to people and creation. Repentance is visible when we live in anticipation of God’s kingdom coming on earth. When we stop taking advantage of one another; forgive those who have harmed us; share our wealth with those in need; live with sensitivity to the limits of Earth’s resources; place our trust in God to provide, sustain, and protect us.

As a sign of the kingdom of God, Jesus sets about calling others to join him. Jesus sees Simon and Andrew fishing and says, “Follow me.” Then encountering James and John mending their nets, he invites them to follow. Karoline Lewis comments, “God knows, Jesus knows, we cannot do discipleship on our own. We cannot do life on our own. We cannot live into our vocations, our truth, on our own. We cannot follow Jesus on our own. We need each other. We need friends and neighbors. We need community and camaraderie. We need others to take risks, knowing that we will take the next ones, and vice versa.”

In our 1st reading about that reluctant prophet Jonah who tried to run away from the mission to which he was called, we see how hard it is to do God’s will on our own. The world conspires to makeJonahs out of all of us. Our faith tells us that we should engage with the
Ninivahs of our world. We long to follow Jesus in building a more just and peaceful world. We know it is God’s will that we practice loving our enemies, forgiving, and modeling compassion. However, trying to do it alone, we sense danger in following Jesus and often walk the other way, figuratively joining Jonah in getting on a boat to save ourselves, hoping all the while the people of Ninevah will get what’s coming to them.

The good news of the Kingdom of God is that we are not left to our own devices to imagine, inhabit, and invite others to live as “beloved community”. By the grace of God’s Holy Spirit, we have been gathered into this parish community in which we are joined with Christ and one another in the risky and life-giving journey of faith. Gathered in community here, we discern the presence of God among us in our life of worship, prayer, service, and witness to God’s saving love that transforms lives and overcomes barriers of division.

Together, we engage in “formation” that connects us to God’s story of shalom that calls us beyond self-interest and suspicion of others. Together, we expand our understanding of neighbors through meeting the men and women of Edwins, working with people from different faiths, races, and economic status in Greater Cleveland Congregations; and breaking bread with people at Loaves and Fishes and St. Luke’s Community meal. Together we worship, making music and beauty that touches our hearts with joy. Together we nurture and learn from our children and expose our youth to a vision of hope through work trips in Harlan, reading camp, and pilgrimages.

Together, we live in response to God’s kingdom that has already broken into this world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Like those first disciples who answered Jesus’ call, we are not always as faithful and trusting as we might be. After all, becoming a faithful Christian disciple and a vital parish takes a lifetime of repentance and realignment with the values of Christ’s kingdom. But as we invest ourselves and support one another in the journey of faith, we will discover in life-changing ways that “true repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying ‘I’m sorry’ , than to the future and saying, ‘Wow!’”