

New Wineskins – Mark 2:22

We are on a journey with Jesus. Jesus has given the invitation to all who will listen, “Come walk with me!” and we, like the disciples, have said “Yes” to the invitation. To help us better understand our journey with Jesus, we are walking with the disciples, observing what they saw, listening to what they heard.

Our journey will introduce us to a completely new way of life and it is our desire that the Holy Spirit will introduce us to that new life as we read Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry.

The second chapter of Mark finds its theme in the words of our text today:

22 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

First we need to unpack this saying of Jesus.

In a country where trees were not in abundance, and where sheep and goats were everywhere, the natural place to store and age wine was not in wooden barrels but in the skins of a goat. The leather of the animal, when freshly cleaned, was soft and pliable. This was good, for when it was made into a canteen of sorts, and filled with freshly made wine, the wine would start to ferment. And as it fermented, it would give off gases, and if the leather could not stretch, the bag would break. But new leather was able to expand as the wine fermented.

However, say someone wanted to save some money, and just happened to have some older wineskins. He might be tempted to put some new wine into those skins, but when the fermentation started to take place and the gases were given off causing the bag to swell, they would not be pliable enough and would burst. Now you have wasted the wineskin and the wine.

That is the background of the teaching. But what does it mean?

Quiet simply, Jesus was saying that he was bringing a new way of life, a new way to walk with God, and the old structures will no longer work.

Jesus is looking at the Pharisees, the most religious people of his day. Over the years they had developed a way to worship and express their devotion to God through some very strict religious practices. Don’t touch this, don’t eat that, do this and don’t do that. They had hundreds of rules they lived by which they felt made them acceptable in God’s sight.

But they were far from God.

Four times in this chapter the ways of the Pharisees clashed with those of Jesus. Let’s take a look at each of these.

The chapter opens with a wonderful story of a paralyzed man being brought to Jesus by four friends. So many people had gathered around Jesus that the friends could not get close, so they go up onto the roof and dig through the clay and wood structure so they could lower their friend in front of Jesus. This is the story we saw in the children’s video earlier in the service.

Now when Jesus sees this paralyzed man the first thing he says to him is, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (v. 5). I wonder how his friends reacted to that? They brought the man to be healed and instead, Jesus forgives his sin.

When Jesus forgives the man’s sins the Pharisees, who were always watching, got upset and said Jesus was blaspheming. They correctly observed that only God can forgive sin, but what they failed to see was that Jesus was God. Their old wineskins said God was unapproachable and somewhere far away in the heavens. But here he stood before them, and they could not recognize him.

To help them see who he was, Jesus asks them a question. “Is it easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven” or to actually heal a man?”

Of course anyone can say “Your sins are forgiven” because there is no way of knowing if anything has truly happened. But to heal a paralyzed man – well, everyone would be able to see if that really happened.

Jesus says, “To show you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I will heal the man.” He turns to the paralyzed man and says, “Get up, take your mat, and go home.”

The man did just that. He got up and for the first time he walked. The crowd was amazed. They had never seen anything like this. They praised God for the miracle, but the Pharisees were not convinced. How could this man, Jesus, be God?

And the wineskins stretched a little...

Then Jesus calls a tax collector to become one of his disciples. Now, tax collectors were seen as wicked people. They had sold out their own people to collect taxes for the Romans. The Romans had conquered the Jews, they were the enemy, so anyone who worked for the Romans were traitors.

But Jesus chose a tax collector named Levi, or Matthew, to “Come, walk with me.” Levi immediately left his tax booth and became a disciple of Jesus. To celebrate this new chapter in his life Levi threw a dinner party and invited all his friends to meet Jesus. Who were the friends of a tax collector? Other tax collectors!

The Pharisees are indignant. If Jesus is the Son of Man, if Jesus is even a holy man, how could he be associating with these tax collectors and sinners?

Jesus turns to the religious folk and says, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (v. 17)

The religion of the Pharisees did not have room for people who did not measure up to their standards. They thought they were righteous because they were so careful to observe the Law. But the truth is, “There is no one righteous, not even one... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:10, 23)

The Pharisees needed Jesus just as much as the tax collectors did. Once again the wineskins are stretching...

One of the things the Pharisees prided themselves in was their great self-discipline. Every week they would fast at least two days. Anyone who wanted to be righteous would fast, or so they thought.

This is why they were so upset when Jesus' disciples were eating on a fast day. Even John the Baptist's disciples were fasting, so why were Jesus' disciples not fasting?

Jesus defends his disciples by saying that the guests of the bridegroom cannot fast during the wedding! Jesus was saying that while he was with the disciples they could celebrate and be happy. There would be a day when he would be gone from their sight and then they could – and should – fast.

The Pharisees did not get it.

This is when Jesus tells them that he was bringing new wine – a new life, a new relationship with God. The old religious structures would never be able to hold that new life. They needed a new religion, one that freed them to follow Jesus instead of rules. But they were not ready...

The last encounter in this chapter is over Sabbath keeping. The Jews were very committed to keeping the seventh day sacred and holy. It was enshrined in the Ten Commandments and found its justification in the Creation story. Through the years the Jews had even refused to go to battle on Sabbath. You could not be godly, they thought, if you broke the Sabbath.

But Jesus looked at the Sabbath quite differently. His disciples were walking through a field, probably already in trouble because you were not allowed to walk too far on Sabbath, when they grabbed a few heads of grain and ate them. This, to the Pharisees, constituted harvesting, which was strictly forbidden on Sabbath.

Jesus confronts their way of thinking by pointing back to the Old Testament where David ate the sacred bread from the Tabernacle when nothing else was available. Then Jesus concluded by saying the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The keeping of rules, even Sabbath, is not as important as caring for the needs of people. Sabbath was given as a gift, not a prison.

Four times Jesus has a run in with the Pharisees in this chapter. Four times he shows them that their religion is getting in the way of following him.

Things were changing – God was doing a new thing, just as He promised he would.

In Isaiah 43:18-19 we read, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. {19} See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

He was looking ahead to the coming of Jesus. Then the Holy Spirit gave these words to the Apostle Paul:

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

If we are going to be ready for the new thing that God is doing, we are going to have to stop trying to fit it in to what we have always been used to. We can never fit God into the neat little boxes that we construct to put Him in. He is far too big...

As I was preparing this message I started to think about the situation we are in with the COVID pandemic. We have had to stop meeting in our buildings and for many people that has been like the end of the world. They feel they have had something stolen away from them because they cannot do things the way they are used to, the way they have always done things.

Yet God has been doing a new thing. Churches that have been slow to embrace current technology and tools suddenly have been forced to go online. Now instead of ministering to a few dozen people they can reach thousands. Churches that had a hard time taking the Gospel outside their building suddenly have learned to make everything happen outside the building.

As one writer put it, we had almost made the building a sacred cow, and it became more important than the message. Not today. The message is going out in many new ways, unfettered by buildings, traditions and old patterns. If you do not see me fighting to open the building the reason is I believe God has lessons he wants us to learn. He wants to pour new wine into new wineskins, and he wants to free us from some of the old wineskins we got used to over the years. Even the ministerial have seen that we have a unique opportunity to work together this year because of COVID and present the resurrection story to a much bigger audience as we go online. Together we will do an Easter service for the community. Praise God – he is doing a new thing!

The religion of the Pharisees was like old wineskins. They were unbending, inflexible and hard. Sadly, there are people today who hold onto old wineskins. Their religion is about rules and traditions and doing things their way, and anyone who does not conform to their ways is judged and condemned. If you meet someone who is very critical of other people, always pointing out how they do not measure up as Christians, you likely have someone with old wineskins.

Jesus came to give people new life, a life that could only be found through faith in him. The greatest barrier to experiencing the new life is sin. So Jesus' first priority was to address the sin problem. For the paralyzed man and Levi, the sinning tax collector, he starts with forgiveness.

Once a person is set free from sin, a whole new life opens up for that person. There is a new sense of joy, hope, peace and even love in their lives. These are gifts from the presence of the Holy Spirit who lives within all believers. The heart is stirred with a love for all people, and God's people are always looking for ways to show that love to others. God is doing a new thing.

The new wine – which represents life lived to the full God's way – begins at the cross where we repent, confess our sins and find forgiveness in Jesus. So that we never forget that our journey with Jesus begins with the forgiveness of sin, Jesus gave us a precious gift to take us again and again to the cross. He gave us the bread to remember his broken body. He gave us the wine to remind us of his shed blood. He called us to his table, not to shame us and remind us how bad we were. He calls us to the table to remind us about how great his love is for us.

New wine in new wineskins – new life poured into people made new by Jesus. We celebrate that today at the table of the Lord.