

*May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

“Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven has drawn near.”

In our Gospel reading, we hear John the Baptist announcing to the people that the Kingdom of Heaven is coming. One Biblical commentator pointed out that the way it is translated in the NRSV does not quite capture the urgency with which God is speaking. John insists that the kingdom of Heaven is fast approaching. Almost like a first century Paul Revere—just replace “the British” with “the Kingdom.”

“Repent because...The Kingdom is coming! The Kingdom is coming!”

Later in the Gospels, Jesus says the same thing “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”

So, what do John and Jesus mean when they say “repent?”

In our culture, the word “repent” can have negative connotations at times. Some may understand “repentance” to mean a sort of self-deprecating groveling, or some may see it as simply saying “I’m sorry.”

In reality, “to repent” means to “turn around.”

When someone repents, they reorient themselves toward God. They stop going in the direction they’re going. They turn around, and they invite God in.

Repentance may look like a one-time transformation, a paradigm shift, a point in someone’s life where they experience an entire psychic change, when they are filled with the Holy Spirit, when they are saved. Like baptism, it could be a one-time event.

But repentance can also look like the simple daily practice of taking our focus off of life’s distractions and turning our focus toward our loving Creator, the God who will always meet us where we are.

Going back to the first form of repentance, the major life-altering kind and the kind that I think John the Baptist is speaking about...

How does a person get to a place where they are ready to repent? To turn around?

The message we often hear is that people come to repentance through fear, shame or punishment. It would be easy to interpret this passage as “repent or else you will go to hell.”

This is not what's happening, but this is unfortunately a very common, but distorted, interpretation of the Gospel.

Trying to get someone to repent through fear is a little bit like trying to stop someone's headache by hitting them on the head. It's more likely to lead to more pain, destruction and sin if fear is the motivator.

Another way people try to do that is shame. Again, if someone is being shamed into changing, it is more likely that that shame will drive them further into those destructive behaviors. It's fighting fire with fire—not water. It's going to increase the problems rather than transform them. The same goes for punishment. These negative motivators do not bring about the life-giving, transforming and joyful repentance of the Gospel.

I think repentance comes by two means: pain and love.

But not just any kind of pain and not just any kind of love.

First, considering pain...It is completely possible for someone to be in terrible, life-consuming anguish and never get to a place where they are willing to turn around and to change.

I believe that in order for someone to come to repentance through pain, it must be pain paired with hope—not with despair.

Over the last eight years, I've had the opportunity to work intensively with alcoholics and addicts through a 12 step program. Alcoholics know suffering intimately, and recovered alcoholics will often say things like...

“Alcohol beat me into a state of reasonableness.”

“Pain is a great motivator.”

“I was sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

“Pain is the touchstone of all spiritual progress.”

The gist of it is when an addict is in enough pain, when they hit bottom, they often find the willingness to do something different to change their situation; however, if the addicted person

sees no way out—no hope of things improving for them—they are unlikely to do things differently, and they're more likely to stay caught in that pain, those cycles of destruction.

But, if they *are* given a way out, if they can be promised that things can change, they are much more likely to do something about their situation—they are more likely to turn around. The path addicts are often shown as a way out is the 12 steps.

If you are unfamiliar with the 12 steps, a quick overview is admitting powerlessness over addiction, coming to believe a Higher Power can restore sanity, turning one's will and life over to the care of God, facing sins and shortcomings and confessing them, making amends to those harmed, continuing to seek conscious contact with God and helping others. From what I can see, this is pretty similar to what Jesus taught his disciples. In fact, while 12 step programs are not religious, the origin of the 12 steps is in the Christianity. Early on, Christianity was simply called "the Way," and I imagine what the first Christians were doing looked a lot like the 12 steps.

The point here is that any person can come to repentance through pain suffering paired with hope. In my understanding, that hope is the way of Jesus. It may be called the 12 steps or it may be a spiritual path by another name: if it looks like a having a relationship with a loving God who shows us how to live in harmony with ourselves, each other and God, then, to me, that's Jesus.

Jesus shows us how to live, a way to be free from sin, a way out of destruction. If that's not enough, we also have our hope in eternal life with God.

In Advent, we are preparing for the coming of Christ—both the incarnation, God coming into the world as a vulnerable human, and the coming of the Messiah as the end of the age when (as our reading from Isaiah talked about) the wolf will live with the lamb, the lion will eat straw like the ox. All things will be made new. All will be restored.

This bring us to the second way people also come to repentance, that is through experiencing profound love.

This can happen in many different ways. Maybe the great love of a parent, friend or family member or being broken open by the unconditional love of God. And through love, including love of oneself, someone can turn around. They can see their faults. They can see the places where they've been selfish or their pride has led them down a miserable path.

Through love and acceptance, they can say, "I can accept myself exactly as I am."  
They can then be inspired to turn their lives around because of that great love.

The Franciscan friar, Richard Rohr, who I will quote more than once in this sermon says that  
**"God does not love us if we change. God loves us so that we can change."**

For us, the best demonstration of God's love for us is God's decision to dwell with us on Earth as a human being. The incarnation is perfect evidence that God will meet us where we are. We do not have to build towers to the sky. We do not have to go on a wandering search for God.

All we have to do is open our eyes and turn around.

Think of it like this. [Do physical demonstration of turning around.]

We might choose to have our backs to God, to have our gaze elsewhere. While God is waiting to engage with us all the time. God is right behind us, tapping us on the shoulder. All we have to do is turn to face God, to invite God in, to allow our Creator's transforming love to fill our hearts.

So rather than attempting to come to repentance through fear or shame, when people come to repentance in love or in the transformation of suffering is a much more effective and lasting way—a way God intends for us to orient toward God.

Richard Rohr also says that if we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it to others. But, transformed people transform people.

Jesus is a wonderful example of that. Christ shows us how to be transformed. We can follow his example and be agents in transforming others. This is what the Gospel is really about: transformation through the Grace and Love of God.

...

So, also in this passage, John the Baptist, as he is urging folks to repent, says to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, "Do not presume to say, "We have Abraham as our ancestor."

What John the Baptist is saying is "don't be complacent."

Yes, you are God's chosen people.

Yes, God made a covenant with you.

John is not saying that that covenant is not valid. It is. The covenant remains.

He is saying don't rest on that—don't only rely on that.  
God's work and God's promise to you is not about your repentance.  
Your repentance is a response to God's promise to you.

"God does not love us if we change. God loves us so that we can change."

I think if John the Baptist were here speaking to us, or if we were to apply the way he is talking to the Pharisees and Sadducees to us, I wonder if John the Baptist might say, "Do not presume to say, "We have Jesus Christ as our Savior."

It could be very easy for us as Christians to say, "Jesus saved us. I'm good. Don't have to do anything because I'm a Christian. So, I don't have to worry about changing or being transformed."

Just like it's still true that yes, Jesus is our Savior, yes, we are saved through Jesus. It is also true that yes, the Pharisees and Sadducees are children of Abraham and there is a covenant there that has not been broken. So, John the Baptist's comment toward them is not a criticism of the way by which they are saved. Just like if he said do not presume to say "we have Jesus as our savior," would not be a criticism of our means of salvation—it's a criticism of our actions or lack thereof.

God works and waits for us to respond.  
God promises salvation, but we must allow ourselves to receive it.

Do you want to be healed?  
Do you want to be changed?  
Are you prepared to live life as a transformed person?

It is actually an encouragement to say, "Look, you have things that need to be addressed too. We all have things that need to be addressed."

You don't have to suffer in the way you have been suffering. Repent.

...

Matthew, when telling the story of John the Baptist, Matthew and the other Evangelists quotes a passage from Isaiah:

"This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight." That's Isaiah 40:3.

It was originally written to encourage Jews in Babylonian exile to return to Judea. Isaiah 40 starts with these verses:

Comfort, of comfort My people,  
Says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem  
And declare to her  
That her term of service is over,  
That her iniquity is expiated  
For she has received at the hand of the Lord  
Double for all her sins.

The annotations from Jewish Publication Society translation say that "The exiles may feel that they deserve punishment, and therefore salvation is remote. The prophet assures them that the punishment they have suffered is more than enough, and there is no impediment to their salvation."

In other words, the prophet is saying, you have suffered enough, it is time to return to the presence of the Lord.

I imagine the original audience for Matthew's Gospel would understand the message that it is time to come out of exile, it is time to turn around and go back to the Promise Land where the Lord will dwell again.

God is returning to the land too. This is way Isaiah says, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make God's path straight."

So when we repent, we also prepare the way for God to enter, not a physical place, but a place in our hearts. To preparing the way for God may look like clearing out some of the junk that we have allowed to stand in the way of being in relationship with God. The junk might look like resentment, anger, fear, pride, addiction, sin in any form or any number of things.

I've heard it said, "We are not punished for our sin, but by our sin." I completely agree.

When we have suffered enough from our own doing, when we have endured enough pain, we can finally become willing to repent, to let go, to surrender, to turn toward God and allow Christ to enter our lives and transform us. God is right there, and if we cannot see, perhaps we need to turn around.

Whether we come to that repentance through the realization of God's great love for us or we come to that through great suffering paired with hope (that Jesus can come to us), the important thing is that we do that turning around.

Henry Nouwen, a catholic priest and theologian, said,

“Only in the context of grace can we face our sin; only in the place of healing do we dare to show our wounds; only with a single-minded attention to Christ can we give up our clinging fears and face our own true nature.”

During this season, in preparation for the coming of Christ, how can we move toward repentance?

Maybe it's incorporating daily prayer into a morning routine.

Maybe it's choosing to face our wounds and trauma in therapy or with a trusted friend.

Maybe it's admission of powerlessness over an addiction and a willingness to surrender our lives to God with the hope that God can transform us into who we are meant to be.

As we continue in this sacred season, may we prepare the way of the Lord, making a path for Christ to enter our hearts. Clearing out the junk and rubble we put there which we are letting stand in the way.

It is time to be in the presence of God—the Kingdom of Heaven draws near.

If we have been in exile, we do not need to suffer from it any longer.

God is waiting patiently for us to take our focus off of stress, self-pity, materialism, addiction, the tyranny of busyness, to instead put our eyes on our Creator who loves us, forgives us, restores us and transforms us.

All we have to do...is turn around.

Amen.