

The Third Sunday after Epiphany
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Texts references: Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23, Psalm 27:1, 5-13

In today's environment, in a world dealing with inflation, political extremes, and the ongoing effects of a global pandemic, I think Christianity has a lot going for it. Scripture preaches meaning and love, hope and endurance, virtues that we can aspire to and which can lift us up in hard times. Yet of course, the word of the day this Sunday morning that comes from Jesus' lips is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

Now I don't know about you, but to my mind, the popular notion of Christian repentance doesn't have a great track record for being a net positive for the world. I could really live into the tradition of many Christian preachers on this point and preach some hellfire and brimstone. And as much as I think I and perhaps some of you might get a kick out of seeing me try to do that... it is a little sad that such a tradition exists.

The fact is, there IS a tradition in Christianity of repentance as a threat. In fact, we've heard these exact words from Jesus in a very threatening context within just the last six weeks. In advent, right when we're getting excited about baby Jesus and the Christmas pageant and Christmas Eve and the manger and silent night, John the Baptist says the words that Jesus just said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" and in the next breath says to Pharisees and Sadducees, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit, then, in keeping with repentance." Before threatening them with parables of fire.

When I was a kid... that notion of repentance kept me up at night. There were moments I was terrified because I had lied or had been mean to my siblings, where I was terrified that the fire John mentioned waited for my seven-year-old soul.

There's a way of hearing Jesus and John and so many others across scripture as saying, "repent! Or else...." And I won't deny that I think that is one message that IS in scripture. And I don't know if it's always a bad one either. There are moments when people need to be told what they are doing is wrong, I think that is John's message to those Pharisees and Sadducees who were seen as corrupt and powerful and dehumanizing of the most vulnerable in their community in that reading.

But I don't think that's the message of the morning. And I don't think that is the most important message in the Christian understanding of repentance. Because I believe the nuance in the Gospel this morning is what distinguishes why it is we aspire to follow Jesus, as Christians, and not John the Baptist. Because Jesus is not threatening with repentance this morning. As I read his words, I hear Christ's voice as imploring. Almost begging. The voice of a friend crying out to another for their happiness — repentance not as turning away from evil but instead the emphasis being on the turning towards the good.

Right before Jesus offers up that word, “repent for the kingdom of has come near,” we are told the words “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” These are literally the words from our Isaiah reading this morning from the Hebrew Bible. In the psalm we hear, “the Lord is my light, and my salvation, whom then should I fear.” And I’m reminded of a favorite poem, which I hope you’ll bear my reading, entitled, “Ode to the Joyful Ones” by Thomas Lux:

That they walk, even stumble, among us is reason
to praise them, or protect them — even the sound
of a lead slug dropped on a lead plate, even that, for them,
is music. Because they bring laughter’s
brief amnesia. Because they stand,
talking, taking pleasure in others,
with their hands on the shoulders of strangers
and the shoulders of each other.
Because you don’t have to tell them to walk toward the light.
Because if there are two pork chops
they will serve you the better one.
Because they will give you the crutch off their backs.
Because when there are two of them together
their shining fills the room.
Because you don’t have to tell them to walk toward the light.

As we hear Jesus’ words of repentance and the kingdom of heaven, we’re given a trust that the repentance that Jesus preaches is meant on behalf of those are lost and hurt, those who suffer without knowing why, who sit in darkness. Jesus calls to the addict and the isolated, the sinner and the confused, calls to tell us, who desperately need hope, that there is hope. Look, the kingdom of heaven is come near! It is as close as your neighbor, as close as the men fishing for a day’s wage, as close as the bus driver and pharmacist and the first person you encountered this morning, even if it was the light of Christ shining in your own haggard face in the mirror after you rolled out of bed.

Jesus calls us to repent, not just to turn away from the darkness of our lives but to remind us that there is light and hope to which we turn. Look at that darkness in your life. The pride or belief that has kept you from joy and contentment, that concern from your mental health that feels all-consuming, that hurt that you did that haunts you, or the hurt done to you that said that you were not valuable. Look away from whatever tells you to feel shame about anything that is integral to who you are. Jesus tells you in our Gospel this morning that you don’t always have to look to that darkness, tells you that there is more for you than pain. There is the kingdom of God. Amen.