

**Repent. No Really. Repent.**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**Matthew 4:12-23**  
**January 22, 2017**

I want to ask you to do something, and it might be a hard ask, but I'll ask it nonetheless. I want you to hear this phrase, really hear it:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

For too long, our American Protestant heritage has betrayed us – it has prevented us from hearing this phrase in its proper context. Four hundred years ago John Winthrop proclaimed the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a City on a Hill. A century later, Jonathan Edwards would call the citizens of this place *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. And some three centuries later we still envision his long, spindly fingers pointing down at us from a towering pulpit. And all too often, we've been lured into a narrative that tells us we are unworthy, unholy, sub-human even. And it's this kind of narrative – a turn or burn mentality – that seeks to literally scare God's kingdom into our lives. It's the kind of narrative that becomes an incubator for twenty-minute altar calls, and public shaming, and scarlet letters, and a Church (with a big C) that loses its ability to be a moral compass in the world.

But more than anything, the traditional reading, the one's that shaped the foundations of this country for four hundred years – it's a betrayal of the text, and of the One who proclaimed and STILL PROCLAIMS its words.

So let me start this morning's homily by saying:

“Friends, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”

And let me start by telling you that these are the words of Jesus. Absolutely. Unequivocally. Undeniably.

And these words are absolutely, unequivocally, and undeniably, GOOD WORDS.

But you must hear them in their proper context. And you must hear them from the lips of the One who spoke them, not an eighteenth-century windbag (although to be sure, a well-meaning and thoughtful windbag).

So let your minds travel across a vast ocean to the very cradle of civilization. Let them drift back in time two millennia. And let your minds be decoders of an ancient, but universal, and timeless language.

Imagine a good-natured fellow. He has a quiet, subtle confidence. He speaks his mind. He is assertive, but thoughtful. He has a calming presence. He listens. He even smiles and laughs like you and me. He even weeps and feels vulnerable like you and me. He's known the full spectrum of the human condition. And a professor once told me that he's probably less than five-feet tall, a man of average height for his time.

But there's something else. He senses God's presence in a way that no-one before him ever has. And in his short time on earth, he's found a way to orient his entire being toward the will of that presence.

Perhaps, if you are lucky, you've had one or two uninterrupted moments of knowing and experiencing God's presence. In other words, the world was so clear, and God was so close, that the rhythms of life just fell into place without thought, and you instantly understood that you were part of something bigger: God's world.

There's a term for that: it's called "being present." My friend Jill Crainshaw says that Soccer players and ballerinas call it motionless movement. It is the intersection of purpose and ability and humanity and God.

Well, this good-natured fellow we've been imagining, the One we call Jesus, he lived a lifetime full of these present moments with God.

And one day, the day our lection points us to this morning, this man, Jesus, began his ministry with a simple phrase: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

But you probably still hear that word repent in its modern context. You hear repent and you think of atonement from sin, and you think of punishment, and you think of sorrow, and shame, and grief, and regret, and a thousand other instruments meant to weigh you down and chip away at your humanity.

Friends, turn off the translations of Rev. Edwards and his long line of disciples, and turn on the translations of Jesus.

When Jesus says repent, he says "Reshape, reorient, recalibrate, return your focus to God."

But really, here's what I think he says, "Look, God is present. Right here. Right now. So stop paying attention to the idle things that distract you, and start paying attention to the good things that make you aware of God's presence."

And here's something else. This statement is not an ultimatum. It is an invitation. Jesus does not threaten his hearers with eternal damnation about a God coming to set right what's wrong. He's not promising to launch a privileged few into a cosmic paradise far better than the world we know now. Nor is he threatening to condemn the heathen masses to a fiery underworld. Instead, Jesus invites every hearer into the present reality: God is now. And God is love. And God offers you and me and everybody the chance to experience love in the present moment. God's world is here, if only you'll open your eyes! If only, you'll look!

"Look, Sardis Baptist Church, God's kingdom is near!"

But the man we imagine also offers a personal invitation to this experience. This isn't public knowledge that's really meant to be private, or hidden from view – it's not stored away as an announcement on a government procurement website, or in the privilege clauses of a complicated contract. This information is in the public domain – it's like a Facebook event with unlimited invites – tell somebody, tell anybody, tell everybody! Because they are all welcome.

But again, don't take my word for it. Read the text. Last week, In John's telling of the story, several disciples asked to follow Jesus, and they wanted to know where he lived. He invited them to "Come and See."

This week, he invites two sets of brothers to follow him. But he won't teach them to fish for fish. He will teach them to fish for people. Immediately, they leave behind all they know – their boats, their careers, their homes, their families – and they follow Jesus.

Remember how Jesus asks us to repent? Or to look? Or to pay attention to what's important?

These men do. They really do.

The Galilee was a fertile fishing region. Herod hoped the hatcheries would drive his economic engine. No doubt these new disciples left good-paying work at a time when work was hard to find.

And no doubt they loved their homes. And their parents and siblings and children. And their communities.

Up until this moment, all of these things represented the purest things in their lives.

But here's what I think Jesus revealed to them, and what he seeks to reveal to us:

A job. A family. A community. A home. A country. All these things that shape our identity, that reveal love and life in some way – all these things are inherently good. But as good and as true as they are, each of them pale in comparison to the presence and to the love of God in this world.

I am the proud son on two loving parents. I am the very lucky husband of an extraordinary wife and partner, and the father of a precious child. I am the grateful pastor of a loving community of faith. I am a citizen of this country. I am an advocate of our state, and I'm becoming one of our great state of Mecklenburg – sorry, but Wake and Forsyth still pull at my heartstrings.

All of these things define me. And as great a love as I have for each of these – and believe me it's beyond description – God's love for me, and God's love for each of you is just bigger. It is the purest, most remarkable, most true thing in the universe, and even beyond the universe.

And in a moment I can't explain, but only hope that will one day happen to me as well, Jesus conveyed such a truth to four fisherman. And in the reality of such a moment, all they could do was follow.

This was not an indictment of their past, but an affirmation of God's future breaking into the present.

And this was not an isolated instance in a manger, nor the end of a miraculous journey by magi from far away – No, this was something much bigger. This was and is an invitation to a life that doesn't just exist in the Galilee, or one reserved for twelve disciples. This is an invitation that is global and timeless and personal, and real, and most importantly, alive – this invitation lives back then, and right now, and for every day to come.

The disciples who dared to follow Jesus, were introduced to a simple, but intricate philosophy: Love God and Love neighbor. And I'd add another component – live with empathy.

They didn't always get it right. But they sure changed the world trying. They had their crosses to bear, and they had their battles to endure. But if you flip to Acts, you'll read about the church these men (and women!) created. A church about the size of our own, where people lived together, believed together,

and had all things in common. A group who took care of one another. A group who spent their days praising and glorifying God in their every action. A group who heard a peasant proclaim: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near! A group who decided to reorient their lives to the present reality of God in the world.

And that brings us to this morning.

For forty-eight hours we've lived with the new truth of our nation: *America First*. Translated, that means that our common link or common denominator or even our least common denominator is our official citizenship in this land. It means that our government will prioritize that privileged status over all else – it means that we are no longer a global people, but a local people. It means that the American Dream is not big enough for a gracious empathy, nor a beacon on a hill, nor a New Jerusalem. Instead, it means an American Dream stuck in the muck of the tangible: a place where consumerism, and patriotism, and jobs, and winning, and privilege, and power are seen as evidence of God's blessing.

And friends, in this world of 24/7 news, we are bombarded with soundbites from every inch of the political spectrum that tell us our very value, our very humanity is linked to documents, and bank account balances, and healthcare coverage, and marriage certificates, and court orders, and political parties, and jobs, and homes, and clothes, and on and on and on. We're forced into a culture where we seek to hoard rather than share, fear rather than love, separate rather than commune.

And in the midst of this chaos, the ancient words had better call us to attention: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Reshape your lives, reorient your priorities, recalibrate your sense of empathy, return your focus to God

And this kingdom's got a slogan, too: God First, Humanity Second.

God is our source. And God is our creator. And God gives us our humanity. It is what binds us. And it is neither little, nor common. And no news cycle, no government, no troubled past, no good job, no family separation, not even death, will prevent us from the community of God's beloved.

The disciples heard the news. They were invited to follow. And follow they did.

And, now, you too have heard the news. And you too have received the invitation.

Will you be distracted by the tumult of the bands and the pageantry of the parade, and the next BuzzFeed article that tells you this is too important not to read?

Or will you repent – the Jesus kind of repent? And once you do, will you follow?

I hear it's a one-of-kind fishing trip!!!

Amen.