

Rethinking Repentance
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 4:12-23
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Hey Sardis Baptist Church:

Feel remorse. Be sorry for. Rue. Reproach yourselves! Be ashamed of. Feel contrite about. Be penitent. See the error of your ways. Be regretful. Be remorseful. Be conscience-stricken. Be guilt-ridden. Wear sackcloth and ashes. Pick a verb. Pick one. Pick 'em all.

For the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Okay, so you caught me. If you were paying attention, verse 17 of this morning's text is translated, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

It seems to me that the word *repent*, in the way we have traditionally understood it, doesn't marry well with the announcement of God's in-breaking realm. The list I just read from is the Oxford Thesaurus' suggested grouping of synonyms for *repent*. To me, each of these words seems just as clumsy, and just as antithetical to God's joyful announcement as does *repent*.

Of course, I am bringing some bias into this argument – my experience of God's presence, and God's kingdom has been one of invitation, openness, acceptance, morality, justice, friendship, love, humanity, compassion, empathy, the list goes on. And this awareness has not been something that's caused me to feel remorse, regret, or guilt. And while I believe my personal experience is important, I'll let the text that follows prove my point instead.

If we choose the turn-or-burn, fire and brimstone, guilt-ridden association of repentance with the coming of God's kingdom, then the paragraphs that follow in today's lection are way out of place.

Repent, Sardis, feel shame Sardis, be regretful, Sardis, for the kingdom of heaven is coming to a village near you. In other words, you're gonna get it!!! If we're

coming from this approach, it would be logical to assume the hearer/reader expects a demonstration of why he or she should have regret, remorse, or sorrow, right? One should expect a warning, or a narrative filled with swift justice – cage-rattling, fire-breathing, earth-shaking, violent, forceful retribution. Sodom and Gomorrah-style annihilation. Or at the very least a tongue-lashing. Right?!?

Nope.

Jesus, the proclaimer in our story, walks along the Sea of Galilee, a sandy beach beside glassy-blue waters, and full of fish and treasures, sees two fishers, and invites them to a discipleship and vocation steeped in people. This is not “an offer they can’t refuse;” this is not a public shaming; this is not a rehabilitation; this is not the propaganda of a zealot. Jesus says, “Come and follow me, be part of my team, and I will show you something even more fruitful and even more fulfilling than a profitable fishing business.”

These neophytes were not zapped. These neophytes were not vetted. These neophytes weren’t sent to an orientation, nor to a management training program, nor subpoenaed by Congress. They didn’t negotiate a signing bonus; they didn’t ask about the benefits; they didn’t ask Jesus about his profitability model or ROI strategy. And Jesus, for his part, didn’t imply that they needed to provide any credentials beyond their status as children of God.

Two more neophytes, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, join the movement. They don’t just leave the business behind, they leave their father, too. And perhaps I’ve seen too many doomsday Hollywood movies, but isn’t that the kind of story arc that’s ripe for tragedy? Somewhere in the near future, Zebedee must be engulfed by a Sharknado, or lost to the plague, because he too, didn’t follow his sons in pursuit of God’s presence.

And what’s the payoff to this story? Will the Death Star be destroyed? Will the Klingons be defeated? Will all those people who didn’t believe Will Smith and Dan Akroyd when they told them the aliens and ghosts were gonna destroy Manhattan be spared?!?

Repent, world. Be regretful, world. Put on your sackcloth and ashes. For the kingdom of heaven has come near. And...

Jesus and his new friends crisscross the Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom (that is God's presence manifested in Jesus, and among us right now), and curing every disease and every sickness among people.

I don't know about you, but for me, every word after Jesus' call for repentance, stands in stark contrast to what we might normally expect, especially if we are wed to a negative connotation of the word repent. I mean, really, in the presence of such a God described here, there's nothing in this revelation that should make us feel regret, sorrow, or guilt. In other words, God isn't shaming us into our potential; God is inviting us into every opportunity for wholeness.

So let me reset things. Repent is used as an imperative verb in our text. The subject is not stated, but it's definitely implied – Jesus was proclaiming to an audience, one back then, as well as one now (you and me!). Hey, y'all, repent, or repent, y'all. Now, the trouble with imperative verbs, is that in most instances, they are received or perceived as commands. They are direct. Their tone can seem bossy or impolite. The English language can be limiting, especially when we fail to consider the many applications of grammar. Guess what?!? Imperative verbs are not always orders or commands. Imperative verbs can also be used to offer instruction, give advice, or extend an invitation. And if you want to denote politeness, you can add the word *do*. Do think about this; Do consider this; Do, Lord, O do Lord, O do remember me!

Based on the text that follows Jesus' proclamation, I believe he's using an imperative verb to both offer advice and extend an invitation to all who will listen, and even to those who won't.

Do repent, world, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!!!

Now let me say one more word about the meaning of repent. Applied as intransitive verb, and especially in a Biblical context, the word repent has been understood as a turning of direction coupled with an authentic desire to amend a particular action, discipline, attitude, or practice.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Like the prophets before him, Jesus is reminding Israel of how one turns toward God, and away from distractions. But in a more unique way, Jesus goes beyond the prophets. He doesn't offer an ultimatum – It's not, "Here's what the Lord requires, so shape up or ship out."

Instead, Jesus invites others to join him in a partnership of fulfilling God's requirements. It's not that ignoring God in pursuit of other things leads to a kind of eternal emptiness and damnation; it's that being open to God's presence illumines fulfillment and opportunity we never imagined were possible.

Hey, Israel, repent, wake up, pay attention, and open yourselves to the idea that God is present right now. And in such presence, God can create a wholeness, a belonging, a community, an enough-ness, a self-awareness and a self-esteem that's so much more durable, and so much more authentic, and so much more positive than all of the artificial measures Caesar's world provides.

Somehow, somehow, Jesus encountered several strangers on a little patch of coastal paradise, not too different from the sands we enjoy on our North Carolina coast. His presence, his voice, his enough-ness persuaded them to turn away. Turn away from nets that bring riches that are somehow still never enough. Turn away from an identity and a vocation that can only be attached to a sir name. Turn away from a lifestyle that's so focused and so dependent on future needs and security, that it's blind to God's presence and God's wholeness and God's enough-ness in the present.

Do repent, friends, do turn toward God, do wake up, do join Jesus, and those who claim his Lordship, in realizing new possibilities.

In 2020, I am working on listening and accepting Jesus' imperative invitation to the kingdom of heaven. I'm working on a positive form of repentance.

When I find myself overwhelmed by the demands of two jobs, stressing out about the next conference call, or making my next visit with a client the most important thing EVER, I'm working to remember that the kingdom of heaven is like a dinner table, with two toddlers and a loving spouse, where there is always grace, where there is always enough, where community abounds.

When I find myself distracted by whether or not the outcome of a Supreme Court Justice nomination, or an impeachment, or an election will determine the fate of humanity, I am working hard to remember that the kingdom of heaven isn't like other kingdoms. I am working hard to remember that Caesar will not have the final word. I am working hard to remember that my ultimate trust, that my ultimate fate, my ultimate security resides in God. And sometimes, no strike that, every time, the systems of our world fail to do what's right, what's just, what's needed, God inspires people to do what systems can't. I'm working hard to remember that Jesus inspires confidence that I, too, and you, too, can be a solution in such a time.

When I find myself glued to a device, which admittedly is more often than not, I'm working hard to remember that the kingdom of heaven doesn't exist in a virtual reality. It's something that's made tangible in ordinary moments. When I find myself claiming my wokeness in cyberspace, I'm working hard to remember that my being awake to injustice means nothing if I'm not willing to spend my life working for justice.

When Jesus meets me on the lakeshore, and says, "Follow me. Come and See. Repent," he's reminding me that I have the ability, in every circle I'm a part of, to help make God's kingdom manifest today. If only, I'll repent, if only I'll wake up, if only I'll choose to be part of something transformative.

And I'm gonna tell you something, Sardis, that's the kind of prophet I hope will join us in our towns and villages, will teach in our synagogues, and churches, will proclaim good news to our neighbors, and will heal and cure all that ails us.

Friends, may we view Jesus' proclamation as an imperative invitation of good news. And may such good news inspire the kind of positive repentance this world so desperately needs.

May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.