

## **Turning Towards or Away?**

**Matthew 4:12-23**

**January 22, 2023**

Last week, Pastor Craig did a sermon on a certain word. I can't say it like he can, so Pastor Craig....

“Behold!”

Behold means something new taking place, that what is about to happen is different from before. The word “behold” was used by John the Baptist when he saw Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” In Judaism, forgiveness of sin came through animal sacrifices. But in Jesus, there is a different way to receive forgiveness of sins. Behold! Something new is taking place.

In our scripture passage today, there is another word we are going to take a look at. It is a word we don't hear much in the Presbyterian Church. In fact, I don't think I have ever heard a sermon on it in a Presbyterian Church.

It is a very churchy word. It is a word that has fallen out of favor in our culture. When people hear it, particularly on a street corner by a preacher, it is ignored or hackles go up. It is the word “repent.”

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Our passage says this was the message Jesus began to preach. If it was Jesus' message, why don't we hear about it more? We talk about Jesus' love and compassion and healing. Why don't we talk about repenting? It was the same message as John the Baptist. But John has been arrested, and Jesus takes the message over.

Repenting was not just important to John and Jesus, it is a theme throughout the New Testament.

One time Jesus said this about repentance, “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).

When Jesus sent the disciples out on their own to preach, the scriptures say they “went out and preached that people should repent.” (Mark 6:12)

After Jesus had risen from the dead, he made sure that his disciples would continue the call for repentance. He said, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, (Luke 24:46-47.)

This preaching continued in the book of Acts. Peter preached to Jews, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19). Paul preached to Gentiles, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

In another place, Paul writes, "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21). And, again "First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds" (Acts 26:20).

You get the idea, right? This word "repent" or "repentance" is a large part of our faith. Yet, we don't like it. You could hear it my voice when I read those scripture passages, I said the word "repent" in a different tone of voice.

I want to take another look at repent, and see if by the time we end this service, we will have a more positive attitude towards it.

So, what does repent mean?

As I was preparing for this sermon, I read our scripture passage in other translations of the Bible. Instead of using the word repent, one translation said, "Turn from your sins and turn to God." (New Living Translation) Another version says, "Change your life." (The Message). How about this one: "You must change your hearts." (Phillips)

We are getting closer to the meaning for repent. The word "repent" means to change one's mind. Not in the sense of changing your opinion, but a change in direction.

If a driver is headed south on a I-19 and suddenly realizes that he or she is going the wrong direction. I did that once when I first moved here. I was heading south on I-19 and completely missed the Continental Exit to get to my house. After realizing what I had done, I had to drive another 4-5 miles to get to the next exit which was Canoa Road, and head back in the opposite direction (North) toward my home.

I had repented—changed the direction I was headed.

John's arrest signaled the start of Jesus' ministry, and Jesus takes over the message of repent from John the Baptist. For Jesus the word "repent" has a different meaning from John the Baptist.

When we hear the word, we think of sin, depravity. In a sense that was John the Baptist's meaning: turn away from sin. But Jesus' call to repentance was a turning towards Someone who takes your sin away.

Follow me.

This was a completely different direction for the Jews. In the OT, forgiveness of sins was based on animal sacrifices. A perfect, spotless lamb was brought to the priest and sacrificed. Symbolically, the perfect, unblemished character of the Lamb was transferred to the sinner while the sins of the sinner were transferred to the Lamb.

So imagine you did this your entire life, and then all of a sudden, you hear someone proclaim, "Behold, something new is taking place. Repent, change your mind or change direction. The real Lamb of God is here to take away your sins.

Repentance is not so much turning away from you sin, although that is part of it. Repentance is turning to the Lamb who takes away your sin. Repentance is turning to Jesus.

Follow me.

In our passage, Jesus calls out to Peter and Andrew, James and John. Follow me. And they did. Their lives took a completely different direction as they turned toward Jesus.

For those of us who follow Jesus today, for some, that change in direction is an instant transformation. For most of us, it is a process, a journey in following Jesus.

The command, "Repent" is in the present tense -- "Keep on repenting!" Continually turn towards Jesus. It isn't like a door we pass through once that gets us into the kingdom. Repentance is the ongoing lifestyle of the people in the kingdom. It's a lifestyle of turning away from sin, those things that hinder your relationship with Christ, and continually turning toward Jesus, the Lamb who takes away our sin.

So back to the freeway analogy:

If you're on the freeway and realize you're headed the wrong way, you can't simply drive across the median and reverse direction. That's usually illegal. So, you look for an exit. The first available exit may be miles ahead. Then you take the exit and usually need to cross a bridge or cross under the freeway to get to the other side. In Minnesota, we encountered cloverleafs to change direction. In New Jersey, it was jug handles. Both requiring you to go past the direction you wanted to go and do a series of loops. Then you take an on-ramp that places you back on the freeway headed in the direction you want to go.

Too often, people think of repentance as something simple. You stop doing something and start doing something else. But usually, it's more complicated. You may need to cross some bridges or go through some tunnels or do a cloverleaf or a jug handle. It may take some time to get headed the other way. Typically, repentance or turning towards Jesus is more of a process.

Repenting is responding to the Work of God in our lives. And as we respond to the work of God in our lives, as we turn toward Jesus, we are inviting God to do what we can't do ourselves – to change and recreate us. Transform us.

Which leads to the next part of Jesus' message: repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. What did Jesus mean? The kingdom of heaven is near? We just came off of Christmas, and we sang songs that proclaimed Emmanuel, God with us. The Kingdom of God is near because God came to be with us in Christ.

Jesus walked up and down Galilee, and everything about him radiated the fullness of God. Our passage ends with this statement: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

One pastor wrote, "He was the real deal, and when he announced the kingdom was near, people believed it because it was unfolding around him with every step he took. Simon Peter saw it, sensed it. His brother Andrew did, too. When this Jesus turned toward them and said, 'Follow me,' they simply replied, 'Alright. We're with you.'"

Turn away from all those things that take you away from me, Jesus said. Repent. Change your mind and turn towards me. Because the Kingdom of God is near. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, is among us. Scripture teaches us that God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, is in each follower of Jesus. We bring the presence of God's kingdom wherever we are.

Therefore, as our scripture passage says, "A light has dawned." We carry that light within us.

C.S. Lewis said, "I believe in God like I believe in the sun, not because I can see it, but, because of it, all things are seen."

There is no reason to walk in darkness when we can dance in the light.

So, as followers of Jesus, let us stand and proclaim together what we believe by saying the Apostle's Creed.