

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 22, 2023

Repentance

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When you're hungry you long for food. When you're thirsty you long for water. When you're tired you long for rest. When you're grieving you long for comfort. When you're in darkness (of any sort) you long for illumination. This reality was driven home for me on a trip I made in high school to Rocky Boy Indian reservation in Montana. A group of us from the church my father was serving at the time went out there to help put a roof on Our Savior's Lutheran Church, located on the reservation.

While we were there we were privileged to learn from the Cree and Chippewa peoples who lived there about their history, culture, and religion. The high point for me of this learning was the opportunity for us to participate in a sweat lodge. We arrived at the sweat lodge, which was a low hide tent with a fire burning nearby, and were given our instructions. Those instructions included a reminder that "sweats" are a religious practice and we should enter this experience with that mindset.

Our small group watched as volcanic rocks were moved from burning fire and placed in the pit in the center of the lodge. We stripped down to swim trunks and were told that if at any time during the experience we were feeling too hot or stifled we could "kick out" by sticking our feet out from under the hides in order to cool off a bit. But we were admonished that if we needed to "kick out" we should try our best not to allow any light into the lodge.

Upon entering the sweat lodge I was amazed at the utter darkness inside. I've gone on some cave tours, and that was the only comparable experience of darkness I had. You literally could not see your hand if you held it in front of your face. I only managed to stay in for the first round of the sweat; there were breaks between each round to get out and cool off a little. That 30 minutes or so of the first round was an intense experience for me!

Utter darkness. It was a bit scary to be honest. But after some moments of silence to start, the leader started to pray and chant in Ojibwa and then invited us to pray as well. So we had these disembodied voices chanting and praying in different languages, all in the midst of total darkness. Then the leader began to occasionally throw seeds and herbs onto the superheated volcanic rocks. As these bits and pieces landed on the rocks many of them would flare up briefly before being consumed.

You would not believe how my eyes clung to those little sparks! For those brief seconds those little points of red became my whole world. My eyes latched on to those little pinpricks of fire in a way I'd never experienced before. I was in utter darkness and even the tiniest light became my sole focus.

I have a feeling that was the sort of experience that the prophet Isaiah meant when he said, "those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined."¹ Jesus echoes these words of the prophet as context before going on to echo John the Baptizer's words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."² There is certainly a sense of grace and salvation in the thought of light shining on a land of gloom and darkness. But I wonder if these two echoes go even deeper than that. Trapped in darkness we long for light. Trapped in sin and death we long for salvation.

I think the longing behind these words wonderfully expresses what repentance is about. The word itself comes from two other Greek words that literally translate to "changing thinking" or "thinking in a new way"³ or we could even use that old Apple Computer advertisement, "think different." When we encounter true life, when we learn who we were made to be and how we were made to live, we long for a change. First John the Baptizer comes along and points out how broken things are and how so many were living lives that were not true life. His message results in crowds of people repenting...why? Why repent your sins if not out of a longing to not be trapped in them anymore?

Then Jesus comes along and says the same thing, except Jesus, as the living Word of God, as the embodiment of God's Kingdom, not only frees people from their sins, he overcomes the very state of sin itself and teaches

¹ Isaiah 9:2b (NRSVUE)

² Matthew 4:17b

³ STRONGS NT 3340: "μετανοέω," THAYER'S GREEK LEXICON, Electronic Database. Copyright © 2002, 2003, 2006, 2011 by Biblossoft, Inc.

us how to be truly human. Jesus teaches us the Way of Christ, a way of waking up and truly seeing the world around us. Is it any wonder that first Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, drop everything to follow him? The Way of Christ seems to be an amazingly compelling one!

All of this is to say that I think we're often wrong in our approach to repentance. I fear that we tend to think of it as a bad thing. Or at least something that is somehow shameful or indicative of poor character. But I don't think it is any of those things. Rather, the repentance that John and then Jesus are moving us towards, is the repentance of giving into our longing for true life. Giving into the deep knowledge that so much of what the world tells us is harmful and untrue. Giving into the yearning I suspect most of us have to be connected to one another, the world around us, and God in deep, intimate, and authentic ways.

The Way of Christ is a Way of community, love, and grace. It is the life for which we have been created. And repentance is nothing more than giving into our longing for that way of life. Giving in and letting go of all the false things that are barriers to this full life. Repentance means letting go of revenge, letting go of wealth, letting go of power, letting go of selfishness. It means recognizing that we are not meant to live alone. Repentance means changing our thinking from what culture and society have taught us to thinking about the Way of Christ.

With this understanding of repentance I think it becomes a more of an invitation from Christ than a threat of judgement or anything else. Repentance means doing what Simon, Andrew, James, and John all did, changing their thinking from fish and boats to community and grace. It means dropping the things that get in the way and following after Christ as we are called. I don't think this means we all need to quit our jobs and become street preachers or anything like that. But it does mean that as we work and play, rest and interact with others, we do so walking the Way of Christ. We live our lives as repentant beings; continually working to let go of what we need to in order to focus on love and life, community and God.

Repentance means keeping our eyes focused on what we long for most...connection. Connection to one another, to the world around us, but most importantly, connection to the divine. It means giving into our longing for true life...life abundant and life eternal. It means pursuing the life we were made to live. It means truly living. Amen.