

**January 21, 2024**  
**“Reimagining Repentance”**  
**Jonah 3:1-5, 10 / Mark 1:14-20**  
**Pastor Tim**

We have a stone candle holder at home, with some figures – holding hands – standing in a circle around the candle holder. Around the candle.

Picture yourself in a circle like that. All facing each other. And all, of course, facing the light, the flame, at the center. Light that allows you to see others in the circle; light that allows you to be seen by others in the circle. Flame that produces heat, warmth, comfort.

Now hold onto that image.

In exploring our two lectionary readings this morning, the first from Jonah and the other from the gospel of Mark, I was drawn to a thread that runs through them both. And that thread is repentance.

In Mark, Jesus comes to Galilee, the region of his birth, proclaiming that “(t)he time is fulfilled, and the realm of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” And this, we’re told, following the arrest of John the Baptizer, who had shared the same proclamation before him.

The realm of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.

In Jonah, repentance comes from the people in Nineveh; Assyrians who were among Israel’s archenemies, even part of God’s perceived punishment of Israel for its persistent idolatry and rejection of the Covenant, when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel.

Jonah sounds the alarm from God that Nineveh will be destroyed in 40 days – note that rich biblical number. And the people believe Jonah, and they believe God. And donned in the customary outfit of repentance, sackcloth, they collectively “turn” from their evil ways. In essence, they return to righteousness. They return to God.

In Jewish tradition, repentance is known as *teshuva*. *Teshuva*, from the Hebrew root, *shuva*, meaning “return.” It’s the central theme of the time between the high holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – Yom Kippur meaning, literally, “Day of Atonement.”

To sin is to turn away, to go astray, from the path of righteousness, from God; and so to repent is to turn, to turn back – to RE-turn again to the path of righteousness, to God.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia* – meaning a change of mind, heart, purpose. A similar notion of turning and returning.

Note that in our reading from Jonah, the Assyrians’ change of mind, heart, purpose apparently prompts God to change mind, heart and purpose – relenting from the promised destruction.

And as a brief aside about Jonah, because we rarely hear from Jonah, this is where the book is unlike any other prophetic books in the Bible. And where Jonah himself is unlike any other biblical prophet.

Biblical prophets were known for initially, reticently, self-effacingly even, dismissing God’s call. Surely, not!! Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah.

But read through Jonah’s four chapters, and right from the start you find the prophet literally fleeing God’s call to go to Nineveh – noting here that the other prophets are primarily concerned with Israel and Judah, the people of the Covenant.

In short, Jonah hops on a ship headed as far from God as he can get. God stirs up a storm. Jonah gets tossed overboard and famously ends up in the belly of a whale, also prompted by God in hot pursuit of the runaway prophet.

After three days and three nights (another rich biblical number!), Jonah gets “spewed” out onto dry land. And with a song of thanksgiving to God, heads off to Nineveh to sound the alarm.

But in the end, Jonah becomes a caricature of the biblical prophet. God offers the Assyrians forgiveness, but Jonah is angry. Unlike Job, for example, who is angry with God

about undeserved suffering, Jonah ends up angry with God about undeserved forgiveness. Why should Nineveh be spared the punishment it deserves?

He'd rather die than live in a world with no sense of order based on the covenantal requirement for justice. God's "steadfast love" wins the day, and Jonah doesn't like it. And so we are left, at the conclusion of the book, in Jonah's shoes – left to ponder questions of love, forgiveness, justice. Who is deserving and who is not?

Which brings us back to repentance.

I don't know about you, but for me, repentance comes – or at least it used to – with a whole lot of baggage. A whole lot of baggage rooted in a whole lot of baggage about who I was. And a whole lot of baggage about who God was.

Within the traditional, conservative Christian context where I grew up, not at home with my family but in the church I attended and with other parachurch groups I participated in as a young person, repentance was a loaded word. A heavy word. SEVERE word.

Steeped in the theological fallacy and doctrinal weapon of "original sin," I – along with all the rest of us – was hopelessly sinful. Depraved. Constantly "going astray." Turning away. Often not doing, as the apostle Paul suggested, what I want, but the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:14)

With everything but sackcloth, I obsessed over, and beat myself up for, every perceived wayward thought or action, as I assumed God was also doing. I was confused about whether what I wanted was what God wanted, but assumed – as I was ostensibly taught – that it wasn't.

I didn't realize it at the time, didn't understand it, but I was afraid. I was primarily operating from a place of fear.

What I believed I "deserved" was punishment – and that's exactly what I got. Years of guilt-ridden, self-loathing spirituality, based on a mistaken and profoundly damaging belief in a God of judgment who was willing to relent, to forgo punishment, to allow me back into God's good graces (as with the Ninevites), to "save a wretch like me," as the

song goes – IF and ONLY IF I confessed and repented of my latest sin. AND within that endless, exhausting pattern of repentance, IF and ONLY IF I believed in certain things – including another theological fallacy and doctrinal weapon – that Jesus “died for my sins.” IF and ONLY IF I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior, and with it the belief that were it not for the redemptive act of Jesus’ sacrifice, Jesus’ “substitutionary atonement” on my hopelessly sinful behalf, I was doomed to hell. Eternal punishment. Like everyone else who didn’t believe.

I thought I was avoiding hell, but hell is exactly what I experienced. And it took me a long time to work through that baggage, to untie all the theological knots inside myself. To heal. To recover myself. And ultimately to turn NOT to a God of judgment, but to the God who is none other than Love itself. Love, by the way, by definition, WITHOUT condition.

To turn instead to the radical Jesus who manifested that Love in the flesh. Who came to remind us NOT that we are loved in spite of ourselves, but because we deserve it. We were made BY, WITH and FOR that love. We are, all of us, to our cores, beloved by God. Our identities rooted NOT in original sin, but in original blessing, as Matthew Fox and others have taught.

We are not hope-LESSLY sinful, we are hope-FULLY blessed.

And so I came to the understanding that Jesus didn’t die to somehow magically atone for the sins of the world; there was and is no such need. Not because there isn’t sin in the world – of course there is! And not because we don’t all need forgiveness and grace – of course we do! But because atonement, healing, renewal, re-creation, forgiveness, grace is our job. Repairing the world, the Hebrew *tikkun olam*, is our job. It’s the calling we all share as co-creators with the God of eternal grace.

Our God, after all, is the God who desires mercy, not sacrifice.

Jesus died because he was killed. Executed by the state for preaching and modeling that love and justice are not conditional. He died because he continued to show mercy, to LOVE, like God does, even in the face of the worst the world had to offer,

even in the face of the cruelty and violence of the cross. Jesus embodied – in life, in death and new life beyond death – that Love had and has the last word. Not even death can overcome it.

That is the good news Jesus preached and embodied. That is the good news Jesus is preaching in Mark's gospel – the word, gospel, of course, literally meaning “good news.”

The gospel in one word is love! Love, love, love, love. Say it with me, love! Period.

NOT, and I repeat, NOT fear! Jesus constantly told his disciples, the crowds that gathered around him, not to be afraid. Because he knew, as we all do, that fear is love's opposite. Fear casts out love. Fear leaves no room for love to take root.

The realm of God, the KIN-dom of God, the KIN-dom of divine Love, has come near, Jesus says. Repent, AND believe in the good news, because the kingdom of God comes nearer still when we do. When we embrace and embody that divine Love.

Individually, yes, but also collectively. The Covenant with God is always about the collective. The common good.

Unlike the naval-gazing, micro-managing spirituality I was taught as a kid, remember that the biblical prophets – and prophets through generation after generation before and since – have courageously called out the need for collective repentance. Social repentance to acknowledge and turn away from injustice, from the systems and structures that benefit some, even a privileged few, at others' expense. That deny anyone's belovedness or the belovedness of Creation itself. That divide us, disconnect us from each other and from Creation.

Social repentance that turns us around and turns us back to love and justice. That returns us to the God of our understanding, to each other, to ourselves. That turns the world around. That turns our attention not to question of what love ALLOWS, but more importantly to questions of what it REQUIRES. To seek justice, love mercy and lovingkindness, and walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8)

Sin, in that understanding, as we have talked about before at Calvary, is ultimately about disconnection from divine Love. And so repentance is about acknowledging the ways in which we have been and are disconnected from the God of our understanding, from each other, from ourselves. The ways in which we disconnect from ourselves and each other and the planet – all of which disconnects us from God.

That does, of course, involve acknowledging ways that we have caused and continue to cause harm to each other and to ourselves. Ways that we have failed and continue to fail in affirming and living into our own and each other's belovedness.

But not, NOT because we are afraid of punishment; let's be honest, such disconnection usually comes with its own punishment. And not because we are hopeless sinners, wicked to the core.

But because we know, deep down – where the still, small voice of God abides – that we deserve better. We all deserve better. We all deserve to love and be loved. To know love and life abundantly. That is God's desire. That is God's will. Period.

As Thich Nhat Hanh asserts, coming of a Buddhist understanding, repentance simply means to begin anew. "We admit our transgressions," he writes, "and we bathe ourselves in the clear waters of the spiritual teaching to love our neighbors as ourselves. We commit to letting go of our resentment, hatred and pride. We start over with a fresh mind, a new heart, determined to do better." To do better.

We bathe ourselves in the clear waters of love, not the murky waters of fear and guilt. And so repentance is never a one-off exercise. It's never about micro-managing every little move we make, or don't. Every thought we have, or don't.

It's a necessarily grace-filled, unfolding, ongoing process of coming back to ourselves and to each other – reaffirming and reconnecting anew to our own and each other's belovedness.

Turning around, RE-turning, again and again and again and again – as Paul Simon writes when he says that we are "born and born again, like waves on the sea."

Motivated not by fear and guilt, but by the promise AND the experience of love and joy.

As Frederick Buecher writes, “To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ than to the future and saying, ‘Wow!’”

The writer Kathleen Norris describes an experience working as artist-in-residence at a parochial school. One of her assignments including asking the children to write their own psalms, their own poems. One poem in particular stood out for her, one a young boy wrote called, “The Monster Who Was Sorry.”

She writes that “he began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; HIS RESPONSE in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town.

The poem concludes: ‘Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’”

And here is Norris’ take-away: “‘My messy house’ says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him he was well on his way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human.

“If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place God might wish to dwell?”

We are, after all, only human. And in our shared humanity, called to make places within ourselves, within our communities, within the world, where the God of Love might wish to dwell.

When we turn away from the circle – remember the circle?! When we turn away from the circle, intentionally and not, we turn away from the light. And that light is love, divine Love.

We turn away from the light of love, the very Source of Love. And we turn away from each other. We turn away from ourselves.

Jesus says the “realm of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Friends, the gospel good news is that we were born to be in that circle. And so we are invited, not OBLIGATED, to reimagine repentance. Repentance is a good thing, a necessary ritual of our human existence!

We are invited to turn around. To return to the circle. Again and again and again – repeating, as needed.

We are invited to return, as we are able, to the abiding light and warmth and comfort of God's circle, even as we are called to draw the circle wide. Wider still. As wide as it needs to be. As wide as God's love.

We are invited to face each other. To see and be seen by each other. To see God in each other, as we see God in ourselves. To love each other and ourselves as God loves us all.

And in so doing, turn the world.

Namaste.

May it be so.