

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“REPENT!!”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 3--January 21, 2018

Lessons: Jonah 3:1-5, 10-4:2; Mark 1:14-20

Repentance is one of those words that we think we understand but often do not. It has to do with being in and seeing the world in a whole new way: God’s way. Often, as it seems in Jonah, it has been defined in a way that emphasizes how totally immoral you are. Jonah was called to Ninevah to tell the people that God was sick and tired of their wickedness. In this text, we don’t know very much about that wickedness except for references to idol worship and violence. We do know from the history of Israel that Ninevah was the capital of Assyria, which was responsible for destroying Jewish cities and carrying people off into exile. They had been hostile to the chosen people of God and Jonah is sent to Ninevah to proclaim its destruction. He isn’t happy about going and the first two chapters of this book explain the lengths to which he goes to get out of this call, but finally he lands in Ninevah because God doesn’t give him much of a choice and he at least can look forward to seeing the destruction of those nasty, mean, and immoral people. At long last, those evil doers are going to get what they deserve. Bad things should happen to bad people and Jonah is going to see that happen. Barbara Brown Taylor has an image of Jonah “rolling into town for a big preaching revival. He puts up his big tent, sprinkles sawdust on the ground, arranges the wooden benches. He spreads the word that there is a revival tonight, and as the time draws near he puts his big black Bible on the pulpit, tests the sound system, and waits for the crowds to arrive.

“And they do—thousands of them, with their children and servants and livestock. Even the king is there.... Jonah knows how evil they all are, how richly they deserve God’s judgment, and he cannot wait to get started. He pulls out his white handkerchief and clears his throat. ‘Yet forty days, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!’ he shouts into the microphone, shaking his finger in the air.

“That is it, the sum total of Jonah’s prophecy in the Bible: an eight-word sermon. He might have been warming up to something considerably longer than that, but no one will ever know, because no sooner does he get that sentence out of his mouth than the whole city repents on the spot. ‘Yes!’ they shout. ‘We believe!’”¹ Hearing Jonah’s very short sermon is enough for the people of Ninevah to change to see the world and their part in the world in a whole new way and God decides not to destroy them.

The story would be a rather simple morality tale—repent and all will be well—if it stopped there. Of course it doesn’t. The people repent and Jonah, instead of marveling at the power of his preaching, is angry. He had hoped to see the destruction of Ninevah. He looked forward, and we can imagine how this feels, to seeing really nasty people finally get what they deserve. When they don’t, he is angry. Don’t be too hard on him. As a nation, we are so focused on making people pay for their mistakes, that our prisons are overflowing, and when people get out of prison, they are like Jean Valjean in *Les Mis*, marked for life as felons, where finding work is incredibly difficult and in most states they can’t vote, they have no voice to change the system. We know what it is to feel like Jonah. We know what it is to believe that evildoers should pay for their evil. We know, with Mary Anderson, that “The evil should be punished and the righteous rewarded. Bad things should happen to bad people and good things should happen to good people.”²

The irony in this story is that the one in real need of repentance, the one who needs to see

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Gospel Medicine* © 1995 Cowley Publications, pages 92-93.

² Anderson, Mary W. “Thy Will Be Done” in *Christian Century*, January 5, 2000

the world in a new way, is Jonah. He needs to recognize that God's sense of justice is not the same as his. He needs to get beyond his belief, to quote Barbara Brown Taylor again, that "undeserved blessings are only supposed to go to the deserving." His repentance will lead him to understand that God's grace and mercy are not limited. Repentance in this story involves understanding that all of us are a bundle of contradictions. We're not as good as we like to pretend we are, and *they*, whomever we assign the role of the people of Ninevah, *they* are not as bad either, or never so bad that they are beyond the possibility of change. Jonah is a very small book that expands the scope of God's grace to include people we never imagined would ever make the cut. For those of us like Jonah, and that would include all of us some time along the way, repentance involves recognizing in the words of the old song, that *it's not my brother, not my sister, but it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer*. God's call, God's grace, God's mercy are given to all God's people.

In the gospel lesson, Jesus begins his ministry preaching the good news of God and saying: "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news." Repentance is the focus of Jesus' very first sermon. If you want to be among those to follow, then you need to repent.

But what does that mean? A couple of weeks ago, we reaffirmed our baptismal covenant and included two kinds of questions: The first asked if you will turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. Part of repentance involves turning away from evil. The second question asked if you will turn to Jesus Christ. When God calls, the world will look different, the undeserving will receive undeserved grace, the most surprising people will be received, the least likely chosen. Celebrating that, is part of what it means to turn to Jesus Christ.

For too many years, repentance has been defined as recognizing how awful and sinful and mean and nasty and unclean we all are. It feels like beating ourselves up. It feels like we are heading back to the old prayer of confession where we were forced to call ourselves miserable offenders. The truth is that we are, but that is also to miss the point.

I have a friend who likes to point out that the doctrine of sin in the church is not meant to make us all feel guilty. It actually is wonderful news. It emphasizes the truth that God knows everything there is to know about us, and loves us still. It surely points out that everybody is messed up, a miserable offender if you will, but that knowledge can in fact free us to recognize that right here, messed up as we are, God can still use us to build God's new realm, to spread God's love and justice far and wide.

Recognizing that we all are messed up, that we all need to repent, may also help us to understand that repentance can be different for different people. What I need to turn from is not necessarily the same for you. Brian McLaren has written about "a new kind of Christian" in our world today. He suggests that our call today is to "leave our tragic stories of wasted possibilities behind, and become part of...God's better story of grace and glory."

"For prostitutes, the call of Jesus was to leave their story of men who pay money for love, and to enter the story of God, who in love pays for us with his own life. For Pharisees, it was to leave their story of religiosity and superiority and rigidity and judgmentalism, their story that was exclusively focused on their own narrow little sect, and instead to enter God's broader and deeper and better story of grace and compassion and mercy and love for all people...."

"For tax collectors...it was to stop collaborating with the Roman Empire, and profiting in the process, and instead to collaborate with the kingdom of God, and sacrifice in the process. For the rich...it was to abandon the hollow story of acquisition, and instead to enter God's better story of generosity. For farmers and shepherds, it was to realize that there's more to life than just planting seeds of wheat or tending flocks of sheep; instead, Jesus invited them to enter the bigger story of planting seeds of truth and seeking lost men and women, every one of whom is loved and counted and missed by God. For fishermen like Peter and Andrew and James and John, it was to trade their

story of catching fish for a bigger story of fishing for men and women, and inviting them into God's story of ongoing creation and redemption.

“For the middle class, who want nothing more than to create a little social aquarium so that their biological families can experience something they call ‘family values,’ it’s a call to care about the families of their neighbors too, especially the poor, to see them as family too.... To everyone, Jesus issues an invitation to abandon the story they will lose themselves in, and instead, to enter the story they will find themselves in.”³

God continues to call. Part of that call involves repentance, which is not nearly as much about looking back at the past and feeling miserable, as it is about looking to the future and celebrating the power of God who chooses people like us and people not like us and gives us everything we need to make this world what God will yet have it be. God is calling and the big surprise is that God really wants you, regardless of your past, and maybe even because of it, to spread God's good news.

Let us pray: Loving God, through your Son you have called us to repent of our sin, to believe the good news, and to celebrate the coming of your kingdom. Like Christ's first apostles, may we hear his call to discipleship, and, forsaking old ways, proclaim the gospel of new life to a broken world; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

³ McLaren, Brian D. *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* © 2003 Jossey-Bass. Pages 236-237