

Sunday April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Easter III

**PRAYER:** O God, who chased the gloom of the disciples with the gospel of Easter and drowned their desert of despair in a sea of grace, surprise us this day. Take from us the presumption that leans on our strength instead of yours, that mistakes our wisdom for your, and equates our will with yours. Assure us once again that our Lord's promise to be with us always still holds good. And be present with us now, as in the days of Jesus, to make us whole and to make us holy.

**STEWARDSHIP:** God is the giver of eternal gladness, the fountain of life from which all blessings flow. All that we have is a gift of God's love. We present our gifts with thanksgiving and as a grateful response to Christ's sacrifice for us. We offer our gifts and our lives in the full assurance that God will use them and us to spread the good news of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:**

O God of Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors in faith, by your grace we have been made, with them, a part of your family. You call us your children, and so we are. You watch over our coming and going; you nurture our growth with sustaining wisdom. You send your Spirit as a guide for our wanderings and give the promise of Christ's redeeming love to rescue us from waywardness. We thank you for the innocence of children, and for their trusting natures. Teach us that same love and trust as we look to you for aid. Their dependence leaves them vulnerable to those in whose care they are placed; may they remind us of the obedience of Christ to the One who sent him into the world. Help our children to teach us what it means to be dependent on another and give us some measure of their humility as we seek to be faithful.

We thank you for curiosity that leads to learning, for the willingness to move beyond what is already known. Use the spirit of inquiry to push us from complacency and make us impatient to know more of your truth. By the gift of your Spirit, give us an insatiable longing to see your will accomplished. Guide us to the scriptures in search of wisdom and give us the disciple to pursue the quest.

We thank you for trials that test our allegiance, and the brokenness within that is the prelude to new growth. When we shy away from suffering, confront us with the courage of Jesus, who endured on our behalf. When we avoid sacrifice, chasten us with your judgment and fill us anew with zeal for your righteousness. You have called us your children and made us members of your household. Help us to grow as faithful brothers and sisters in response to your trust.

**BENEDICTION:** O Lord, as you have made disciples of us, now you send us into the world to make disciples of others. Go with us and be our guide, that the witness of our lives may confirm the testimony of our lips.

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Acts 3:12-19

“Ignorance is not Bliss”

One of my favorite stories, and perhaps one you have heard before, is in the setting of a small, country, white-frame church. And as is apt to happen, it seems that the paint was about gone on the old church to the point the boards were nearly bare. So, the people asked the pastor, (why they would think we learned about painting in seminary, I’ll never know) what to do. He suggested that they have a work bee on the coming Saturday and paint the church. The people agreed.

On Saturday, therefore, an eager crowd starting painting the church, but as the afternoon wore on, they realized that they would not have enough paint to finish the job. Once again, they asked the pastor what to do. He said, “Well, this is water-based paint, so let’s add water, and thin the paint some. Maybe we will have enough to finish that way.” Sure enough, they were able to finish the paint job. As they departed for the day, the people took one last look to admire their handiwork. The church looked beautiful.

But not long after they left, a huge thunderstorm broke over the church, and the downpour washed most of the fresh paint off the church. When the people arrived the next day, they were understandably distraught. They asked the preacher what they were going to do now. The preacher, in his best, ministerial cadence replied, “Re-paint, re-paint, and thin no more!” One moral of the story is not to ask your pastor any maintenance questions.

Our scripture lesson for today, deals with the theme of repentance. A theme none of us perhaps wishes to dwell on but nonetheless, we encounter it in today’s lesson. In fact, repentance is a prominent theme throughout much of the book of Acts, as well as throughout the bible.

When Peter first began preaching, he says that we need to deal with our sin before new life comes in our hearts. In Acts 2:38, Peter says, “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” In our text for today, Acts 3:19 says, “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, so that there may come times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord...”

Later, when Paul was preaching before the Aeropagus in Acts 17, he says, “The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked. But now he commands that all people everywhere should repent” (17:30). If this word repentance is such a prominent word in scripture then perhaps we better endeavor to answer a question. What exactly is repentance? Let me give you the following illustration as a possible explanation.

Imagine we are driving in the dark, in an unfamiliar area and we are worried about the route we are to take. This has happened to many of us who drive. As we journey on, we finally discover the right highway number – #82. You ever have the feeling that comes next. That sense of relief and we relax because we are finally on the right road. However, as we speed along, we do not find the expected towns at the right time. Questions begin to invade our minds. “Did I misread the sign? Is my GPS malfunctioning?”

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In a situation such as this, apprehension mounts, until finally our worst fears are confirmed when we find a sign that indicates we are approaching a town in the opposite direction. We are on exactly the right road, but we are going in exactly the wrong direction. We went east instead of west or south instead of north. Frustrating yes. We conclude that there is nothing else to do, but turn around, and head back the other way.

This is a pretty apt picture of what repentance in scripture means. Repentance as it is presented throughout the bible means a turning around of life from going in the wrong direction, to going in the right direction. The word repentance as used in both Old and New Testaments means basically a “turning to God.” I also like to think about it as God recalibrating our GPS. You know that voice on the GPS that says “recalculating”. Repentance is recalculating.

Repentance, is first of all, a turning from our past. Our past as individuals and as a community. In the previous story, we were on a perfectly good road: smooth and wide and straight. It may be the best road in the province. Furthermore, it is the right road, not some detour, or side road leading nowhere. There are many other motorists traveling with us in the same direction. We are obeying every traffic law. Our automobile is functioning properly. We have lots of fuel. We are enjoying a delightful conversation with our companions. We seem to be making good progress.

But despite all of those positive feelings there is one fatal flaw: By continuing as we are going, we will never reach our destination. Although everything seems to be fine, unless there is a fundamental change of direction, we will utterly fail in our plans. The spiritual parallel is just as vivid. In setting the course of life, most people choose a well-traveled road that seems to offer many advantages. Our intentions are good. We are not bothering anybody else.

But after a time, life just doesn't turn out the way we expected. Telltale signs along the way begin to suggest that merely to continue more of the same, year after year, will not get us where we want to go. Then some sign, some life event perhaps, comes along that indicates plainly that we are headed in the wrong direction. That if we persist in more of the same we will actually make the problem worse.

I need to be clear here, it is not a matter of doing what we are doing better. It is not a matter of a little fix-up. Some people say things like, “I just need to try harder. I just need a little luck.” Tweaking our lives is not what we need. We must turn completely around. We have to turn from the past. At one time a woman of unsavory experience was delicately, but cruelly referred to as “having a past.” But in fact, everyone has a past.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote a poem which said: “There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it behooves all of us not to talk about the rest of us.”

Yes, if we are honest, we have to admit it. We all have a past that we don't know how to get over. The Christian faith has a great suggestion about dealing with our past. We can repent. Repentance begins with the recognition that life is moving in the wrong direction – no matter how long we have been doing it, no matter how many others may be doing the same thing, no matter how contented we are with our situation.

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It also involves the willingness to analyze where life is really heading. Repentance speaks to an urgent need which we all feel to reorient life so that it will be centered around the right goals, centered around God. To repent does not mean to admit that we have done something worse than anybody else. Rather, it means to step back and take stock, to evaluate the present direction of life, and then to decide if we are headed in the right direction.

Repentance is also a turning toward the future. Let's return to our travel story. After realizing that we are headed in the wrong direction, we are frustrated by our terrible mistake. We might stop the car and scold ourselves for our stupidity. We may blame someone riding in the car with us. We may blame the poor quality of Google maps, which I have done recently. We may curse that we are a man. and we refused to ask for directions.

We might even accuse the Highway Department of not making the road signs clearer. But none of this finger pointing will do us any good. Instead of blaming: ourselves, our spouse, or the world in general, what we really need is to turn around and travel in the opposite direction. Implicit in this need, is the fact that something better awaits us in the opposite direction. In the same way, many people never get around to repenting either, because they are looking for somebody to blame for their situation.

Despite what we try to tell ourselves, the blame game doesn't get us headed in the right direction. Or imagine this scene. We realize that we are headed in the wrong direction, but we decide to continue on this road anyway! We might say, "Well, we are headed in the wrong direction, but let's just keep going and see if we get there anyway." Some people are so set in their ways that they are willing to settle for second best.

Some people keep expecting new results from the same old behaviors. "This is just the way I am. I'll keep doing the same thing over and over again, but maybe I'll get different results this time." That seems illogical, maybe even insane. It won't happen! Your life's situation will not improve without a change in direction.

What we need, I think, is assurance that a finer destination awaits us in the future, if only we will abandon the way that we have been going in the past. Notice the last part of Acts 3:19: "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, so that there may come times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord..."

Jesus presents a different future in Mark 1:15, "**The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent, and believe in the Good News.**" Jesus did not say, "Repent because of your past." Rather, he said, "Repent, because God is about to do something wonderful!"

In repentance, we have not only a dissatisfaction with the way things have been going, but also a yearning from something better in life. All of us want a future that is better than our past. So, the possibility of entering the kingdom of God offers a reason to break with the past and redirect our lives. Now we have fresh commitments that point life in a different direction. Now we have a better option that awaits us if we will turn in a new direction.

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As long as we focus on our mistakes we are going to be immobilized by our guilt. Only as we turn from our present course, and look in a new direction, will we discover an alternative compelling enough to call us away from our mistaken path.

We talked about the past and the future but repentance is also a turning around in the present. Once we learn that repentance is good news rather than bad news, then we are more likely to accept this option of turning around. But such change is never easy. In fact, it may be frightening.

Our situation may be like the circus act with the daring young man on the flying trapeze. He swings through the air with the greatest of ease. But at the critical moment, he lets go of one swinging bar, and turns in mid-air to reach out for another. That heart-stopping twist far above the crowds is risky business, but taking such a leap is what repentance is all about.

It is giving up what we have – which is safe, secure and certain – for what we don't have – which is unsafe, insecure and uncertain. But such risky turning is at the heart of real repentance. In a Jewish prayer book called *The Gates of Repentance*, we find this paragraph:

“Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves, birds and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. And this is always painful. It means saying I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways.”

I have one last point I would like us to consider today. Why should we repent? I have tried to present the logic of repentance. We can never get to our real goals if we just continue doing the same things we have always done. If we keep going down that road in this direction, we will never get to our destination. But we should also consider God. When we go the wrong way in life we break the heart of God. And we should care so much about God that we don't want to break God's heart.

Walter Wangerin once told about an experience he had with his son, Matthew. When Matthew was seven years old and in the second grade, he became fascinated with comic books—so much so, that one day he stole some from the library. When Walter found the comic books in Matthew's room, he confronted him, corrected him, disciplined him, and took him back to the library to return the books. Matthew received a stern lecture regarding stealing from the librarian and also from his dad.

The following summer, however, it happened again. Matthew stole some comic books from a resort gift shop. Again, Walter corrected him, told him how wrong it was to steal and made him return the magazines. A year later, Matthew once again stole some comic books from a drug store. Walter decided he had to do something to get his son's attention and to underscore the seriousness of stealing.

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So, he took Matthew into his study and said, “Matthew, I have never spanked you before, and I don’t want to now, but somehow I’ve got to get through to you and help you see how wrong it is to steal.” So, Walter bent Matthew over and spanked him five times with his bare hand. Matthew’s eyes moistened with tears, and he sat there looking at the floor. His father sensed that his son did not want to cry in front of his father, so he said, “Matthew, I’m going to leave you alone for a little while. You sit here, and I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

With that, he stepped out of the study and closed the door behind him. Once out the door, he says that he was overcome at the thought of what he had just done. He, himself, broke down and cried uncontrollably. When he had regained his composure, he went into the bathroom and washed his face. Then he went back into the study to talk to his son.

From that moment on, Matthew never stole again. Years later, as Matthew and his mother were driving home from shopping, they talked about some memories of his childhood. They remembered the incident with the comic books. Matthew said, “Mom, after that, I never stole anything again from anybody, and I never will.” His mother asked, “Was it because your dad spanked you that day?” “Oh no,” Matthew explained, “It was because I heard him crying!” (2)

We repent because God loves us. He wants what is best for us. And only God offers a direction to abundant life.