

GOING HOME

What is the meaning of REPENTANCE? Yes, finally! Repentance means to RETURN: to return to God – to go home. Repentance is going home. So now, finally, if you have been truly listening through this Advent season, I can call you to the clear and joyous cry of Advent – and perhaps for the first time in your life you will not misunderstand. Shall we try?

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”

Couldn't make it, could you? Fifteen hundred years of bad conditioning is hard to reverse in three short weeks. But don't give up on it. The first few hundred years are still on our side. The first Christians did not misunderstand. They knew repentance was something incredibly wonderful. They would not have lived and died the way they did, changed the world the way they did, or called so many others to come repent with them if they thought repentance was the dismal and negative thing most of us have come to believe.

“Repent, for God's Kingdom is at hand!” No more joyful cry has ever pealed forth over the habitations of humankind. God's reign – God's very existence, so long shrouded in mystery; so long vague and distant; so long disbelieved, or believed too great for the likes of us – is at hand. It is coming close again. It is made available to you and to me and to everyone we care about. Out of the fog and the theory and the despair and the broken hopes, it is here again – clear and waiting and inviting: God with us. And so, thank God! We get to repent! We get to RETURN. We can go home again. We can go back to God.

The only possible response to the cry to repent is overwhelming relief and joy. If that is not the response, then the message is misheard or flat-out disbelieved. That is, it's hard for most of us to believe at first that repentance is possible. At first we think that repentance is not even on the map. We think that the road back home to God does not exist. Or that God does not really exist – not the personal God of love that Jesus tries to reveal to us. Or that God would not really forgive us *that* entirely. Or that we are not that important.

You see, the call to repentance is the incredible assertion – no, wait; that's not strong enough. You cannot say “repent” in soft, conversational tones. To whisper “repent” is to contradict meaning

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with style. The call to REPENTANCE is the blatant announcement – the clear *proclamation* – that the way home is open again. All of our lives, we have heard it as a scolding denunciation: “Change your ways or you will be brutally punished.” For all the rest of our lives, we must rehear it as the open-armed invitation to come back to love and Life and joy. RETURN: We are going home. We are going back to God at last. HURRAY!

How did we get so far away from home in the first place? That was last week. The story of the Prodigal Son is our story too. We go out into the world to seek our fortune, our destiny. This world we live in is the “far country.” There is a spiritual dimension within and beyond this world, but none of us discover it easily or trust it automatically. In some manner, we all seek our fortune by seeking our *own* way (at first, and along the way, and again and again). We seek fame, glory, riches, popularity, relationship, knowledge, power. What else *is there* to seek? Of course, we mean well, and we want to help a lot of other people too. Helping others in some way is how we can acquire fame, glory, riches, popularity, relationships, etc. So good strays into evil, and sometimes vice versa.

As time goes on, we discover that to gain our goals, we need more power, more influence. It’s hard sometimes to understand why we don’t get more appreciation, more cooperation, and more support, considering our good intentions and how hard we work. But as time goes on and we encounter more and more clearly the magnitude of endless and appalling human need, we come more and more to need reassurance, some hint of progress, some hope that “it’s worth it” – some indication that we ourselves are “good,” worthwhile, important, acceptable (to God, to ourselves, to anyone). Doubts grow, and fear (inner anxiety, if you prefer) is never far behind. For many years, our reaction to all this is to work harder and try to gain more resources – so we can reach some of the goals we have set, and so we can see ourselves accomplishing something, helping in some way, being important in some way, making some kind of meaningful contribution. As a result, power and/or influence in whatever way we seek it becomes more and more critical. Sometimes in our confusion or desperation, it even becomes the goal itself.

This is the way the “far country” works. This is what it means to be away from home; away from God; trapped in a broken, alienated world. Putting it bluntly: the more we care and the harder we try, the more we encounter evil, and even play into its patterns. Sin is not just

a choice; it is also a condition – a situation from which we cannot extricate ourselves. I doubt if any of us are pleased about the slaughter of the whales or the buffalo or the seals. It is not our desire to see species go extinct, bring smog into the airways, or ruin the waterways with our pollution. But we are here and that is what is happening, and we are why it is happening.

Unless you believe that God likes smog, sickness, starvation, and destroyed land, you know it is SIN: *alienation* from God – *against the will* of God. You also know that the wages of sin is death: that if we do not stop it, we will kill the life systems, and that our kind will die in ever increasing numbers, maybe even going extinct ourselves. That which goes against the will and the way of God is destroyed in the end – or, more often, destroys itself (same thing). Yet we are part of it; we cannot help it; we cannot seem to extricate ourselves from participation – from furthering the damage and destruction.

So we seek more power, that we may find some new and better solutions. And so the cycle repeats and increases. It all works against humility, trust, faith, love (worship).

I picked only one thread, but repentance applies to them all. How do we RETURN from destroying Mother Earth – from lives and lifestyles that destroy? How do we RETURN from lives that destroy relationships – that start out in love and end in divorce; that start out in friendship and end in animosity; that start out with the adoration and pure magic of tiny babies and lead on into adolescence or young adulthood, where parent and child cannot be under the same roof without strained silence or hot anger?

How can we RETURN from lives that are too busy; minds that are too jaded; dreams that are too shattered; hearts that are too broken; souls that are too weary? How do we RETURN from lives that have somehow grown too greedy, angry, compulsive, manipulating, controlling?

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” Really? You mean it’s now possible? How wonderful! How fantastic! How soon? Oh, thank God!!! How we have all longed for this day.

Jesus opened the WAY. Jesus came revealing a new category – a new dimension – of obedience to God. All concepts of spiritual freedom, of radical obedience to God’s will regardless of the world’s

pressures, of living for the truth, of loving people, of dealing with evil – all have been and continue to be revised and made new as a result of Jesus' impact in our world. The Cross was the ultimate gauntlet thrown in the face of a world so afraid of death it could barely live. And the Resurrection was the evidence we needed that the power of love and mercy was not only real, but even greater than the power of coercion and domination. All of it pointed straight back to the God we had misjudged and misunderstood. The God of awesome might and wrath had come close, the WAY was open, and a repentance we could not have dared to dream of was real. We could RETURN, go home, be in love again with God.

Nobody could have foreseen or known or understood very much of what would unfold from Jesus' birth. But looking back, having seen and experienced all that took place – from the cry of John the Baptist to the spreading of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ throughout the Roman world – people realized that Jesus' birthday had unleashed in the world the most dynamic power in all human history. That day was the most dramatic day of change (repentance) that we humans have seen so far. Christmas therefore *feels* like and symbolizes for us the summation and the announcement of it all. Christmas means repentance is for real: Repentance is a valid option. Repentance is possible. The WAY is open! We can go home again! We can go back to God, and God is waiting with open arms.

Of course, there is a time to go out into the world and seek our fortune. At any given moment, the majority of people on earth are not ready to repent. We do not want to go home yet – we have not yet fully realized what a “far country” we are in or how serious it can get. Since we are sent here to learn that we cannot do without God and what it's like when we “go it on our own,” naturally most of the world is occupied most of the time with the various phases of learning that lesson. It's hardly fair to complain. Nevertheless, Scrooge is not the real threat to Christmas. He is just a lonely, cynical old man who thought no truth was left. He was really delighted to discover himself wrong.

The real killers of Christmas are those who are not yet ready to repent – those who are still happily or urgently or ruthlessly exploring the world and seeking their fortunes, still convinced they can find it, do it, win it, and conquer it on their own, without surrendering to God. For them, Christmas is just going through the motions, or it is a left-over habit or custom from youth; a convenient way to impress others with lavish gifts (that demonstrate their success); a decent way to have

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a family gathering; maybe even a great opportunity to make more money. It's all right; no need to fight them. We have all been there too. Time and experience are the warriors we all must face. But those who are not yet ready to repent are the enemies of Christmas.

So how do we repent, having heard the proclamation and received the invitation? It's not as hard as we think or keep making it. That is, it is only hard while we still struggle between wanting to return and not wanting to return. Repentance seems harsh when we still have one foot wanting to march off and make another attempt at success in the world on our own terms, and the other foot wanting to march back home. But once decided, it is easy. You pack it in and head for home. You follow Jesus back out of the maze, back toward home, back to the Waiting Father.

Yes, repentance is a turning. You throw everything out of your life that does not want to return to God. You throw every ambition out of your life except the ambition to be a humble and willing servant of the Lord. You throw away all the power and influence, and all the desire to ever acquire any of it – unless the Lord provides it for his own purposes, without your seeking it. You seek that which is peaceful, that which is thankful, that which is willing to *trust* the Holy Spirit for anything and everything that comes.

Clearly we cannot go home on the outside first. That would be suicide. We go home on the inside first. It is the dying to self wherein we find our true selves. There is more than one way to do this. The way we know and talk about around here is the WAY of loving and following Jesus Christ. Loving Jesus more and more and going where that leads us – that is what we are about. Even that does not get us all the way home, but it sets it up so Jesus can take it from there. At least that's what we believe – it is what we bet our lives on. Merry Christmas! Profound, incredible, delightful Christmas.

So maybe you are someone still relatively content to be out in the world seeking your fortune, and you are just here at this church sort of saying hello. Or maybe you think that this is the place you ought to be able to find new recruits for your pet projects and goals. After all, isn't the church made up of "good" people who want to help others? The answer to that is NO, we are not interested in power plays, and the only help there is for any of us is a road back to God – a road back home. But we know you mean well, and you are welcome to rest here for a while if you like.

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On the other hand, if you are someone who has never been told that God and home are real or that the road is open, and if you are tired of doing it your own way and ending up alone, then do we have GOOD NEWS for you!

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” RETURN!
Head back home to God.