

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Pandemic Repentance

Mark 1:1-8

A Sunday School teacher was telling her first grade Sunday class about John the Baptist. After mentioning that he ate locusts and honeycomb, she noticed a puzzled look from one of the boys. "Wow," he mused, "I never knew they had cereal back then!"¹

I don't know what you had for breakfast today, but you've arrived for worship on a Sunday morning when John the Baptist is serving up a large portion of repentance. That may sound like a rather bitter tasting dish for folks like us who are seeking some joy on the way to Christmas. Don't we already have enough bad news to deal with in our lives and in the world? Why does John have to show up, like some Grinch, to steal what holiday gladness we've been able to muster during a pandemic?

But that would be a misunderstanding of John and his message. True, he has a rough appearance and delivers a hard-edged sermon. But there are times when God's people need an urgent, confrontational word that breaks into the status quo and calls us to turn back to the Lord. What strikes our ears as bad news is actually part of the good news of how God has arrived to set things right in the world. The ministry of John the Baptist is living proof that God has kept his promises. A Savior is on the way.

John's job is to get God's people ready for God's reign. That preparation includes repentance. As I indicated, it's not a feel-good term that sparkles with holiday cheer. To many, it sounds sort of antique and out of place in a culture where the language of sin and disobedience has receded. The Greek word basically means "to change one's mind." Behind it lies the Hebrew verb, "to turn around." In other words, to change your heart, will, and conduct. I like the way that Dallas Willard summarizes it: "*Repent* just means to turn back on how you are thinking about things and to reconsider."² Not just because it's a good idea, or because John is a really persuasive preacher, but because the kingdom of God has come upon us.

In his book *Mission in Christ's Way*, long-time missionary Lesslie Newbigin, who served in India, writes about the meaning of repentance:

I remember once visiting a village in the Madras diocese. There was no road into the village; you reached it by crossing a river, and you could do this either on the south side of the village or on the north. The congregation had decided that I would come by the southern route, and they had prepared a welcome such as only an Indian village can prepare. There was music and fireworks and garlands and fruit and *silumbum* (the performance of a South Indian martial art done on ceremonial occasions), everything you can imagine. Unfortunately I entered the village at the north end and found only a few goats and chickens. Crisis! I had to disappear while word was sent to the assembled congregation, and the entire village did a sort of U-turn so as to face the other way. Then I duly reappeared.

This is what *metanoia* means... The point is: "The reign of God has drawn near, but you can't see it because you are looking the wrong way. You are expecting the wrong thing. What you think is 'God' isn't God at all. You have to be, as Paul says, transformed by the renewing of

your mind. You have to go through a mental revolution; otherwise the reign of God will be totally hidden from you."³

When John preaches "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4), he's in the business of changing minds. He's in the business of opening our eyes to the reality of God's presence. And when we see ourselves in the presence of God's saving judgment, we recognize our own sins, our guilt, and our need for forgiveness. The good news about Jesus Christ enables us to see the bad news about ourselves. As Eugene Peterson puts it, "Repentance is a realization that what God wants from you and what you want from God are not going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts."⁴ God wills that you turn away from sin and toward him, and go in the direction that his reign is going.

Dallas Willard says that as a child, he lived in an area of southern Missouri where electricity was available only in the form of lightning. But during his senior year of high school, the Rural Electrification Administration extended lines into the area, and electrical power became available to households and farms. According to Willard:

When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life—daylight and dark, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it—could then be vastly changed for the better. But we still had to believe in the electricity and its arrangements, understand them, and take the practical steps involved in relying on it.

You may think the comparison rather crude, and in some respects it is. But it will help us to understand Jesus' basic message about the kingdom of the heavens if we pause to reflect on those farmers who, in effect, heard the message: "Repent, for electricity is at hand." Repent, or turn from their kerosene lamps and lanterns, their iceboxes and cellars, their scrubboards and rug beaters, their woman-powered sewing machines and their radios with dry-cell batteries.

The power that could make their lives far better was right there near them where, by making relatively simple arrangements, they could utilize it. Strangely, a few did not accept it. They did not "enter the kingdom of electricity." Some just didn't want to change. Others could not afford it, or so they thought.⁵

As Willard acknowledges, this isn't a perfect illustration of Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God, and the preaching that John the Baptist did in advance of that. But it does show us that how you and I respond to the new reality that has come upon us through Christ makes all the difference, which means that repentance is critical.

Repentance is important all the time. It's a vital part of our spiritual formation year-round. But during a year like this one, when so much has weighed heavily upon us, couldn't we lighten up on the call to repent? Wouldn't it be easier to focus more on things that seem positive and upbeat?

Actually, there's nothing more positive than the news of God's grace that has come on the scene in Jesus Christ. Remember that today's text opens this way: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (v. 1). So this is how the good news of Jesus the Messiah gets underway. God is on the move, keeping his word, coming with deliverance. And he wants to bring you and me into what he's doing. But God's move toward us calls for us to turn toward him. You and I need to reorient our heart, will, and conduct to be in keeping with his reign. And as we do that, we experience more of what makes the good news good.

Repentance can take many forms, depending partly on who we are and where we're at in life. During much of this year, we've been in pandemic circumstances. Though some things have stayed the same, a lot has changed. As one person has put it, "Our comfortable, settled American life has given way to a season of wilderness."⁶ So as we make our way through this wilderness, what should our repentance look like?

For one thing, repenting means turning away from sinful illusions that we're invulnerable. The scale and scope of sickness and death during the pandemic can reawaken each of us to our own mortality. As we pray for the sick and mourn with those who've lost loved ones, we can also get a deeper sense of our shared humanity, which includes the fact that we're all at risk of disease and death. So COVID-19 becomes an opportunity for us to face up to our limitations, our frailty, and our vulnerability. We can turn more fully toward the eternal God, the only one who can give life immortal.

And turning toward God involves turning away from the things that we treat as godlike. Rather than worshiping youthfulness, body image, and physical health, we can return to the Lord, who knows that we are weak and dependent beings, in need of his mercy and strength. Don't get me wrong, health is a good thing, but it's not an ultimate thing. Longevity is a blessing, but we must beware of turning it into our primary pursuit. We're called to seek, above all else, the life that truly is life. Life in the reign of God, life in Christ, now and forever.

That kind of life isn't grounded in how much you earn, what you produce, or how much you achieve. Now I don't mean to minimize the economic and material hardship that so many people have gone through, and are still enduring, during the pandemic. The financial suffering is widespread and deep. But at the same time, COVID-19 can create opportunities for us to rethink our reliance on material wealth and to turn away from lives of excessive consumption. In fact, now is an opportune time to repent of the sin of cocooning ourselves within our own material and physical safety and ignoring the physical, financial, or emotional pain that others are going through. Just when it's tempting to secure ourselves within the four walls of our own personal kingdoms, God sends forth the call to turn back and remember how our lives are deeply intertwined with the lives of others.

During this time, we have opportunities to rethink what matters most, and to repent of the ways we've prioritized progress over people. In our culture, a lot of life is built around the narrative of human progress, economically, technologically, and sociologically. We pride ourselves on being able to move things forward. But COVID-19 has challenged and disrupted our sense of what's possible, both good and bad. This year has become a season in which we can repent of the notion that the future is in our hands, that it will be whatever we make it. Instead, we can turn away from self-reliance and toward reliance on the faithfulness of God as the true ground of our hope. We can return to living rightly with God and with others.

Kathleen Norris has written,

Repentance is not a popular word these days, but I believe that any of us recognize it when it strikes us in the gut. Repentance is coming to our senses, seeing, suddenly, what we've done that we might not have done, or recognizing... that the problem is not in what we do but in what we become.⁷

As God's people, our experience in this pandemic wilderness isn't just something to endure, something to make it through. It's also a time and place for learning and practicing

repentance. It's a time and place for seeing more clearly what we've been, and what we can become through turning to the Lord.

¹ Abigail A. Freeman, *Christian Reader*, "Kids of the Kingdom."

² Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2014) 15.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way* (n.p.) 2-3.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019) n.p.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) 30-31.

⁶ Jeremy Sabella, "Our Nostalgia Is Spiritually Dangerous." Christianity Today website. July 16, 2020. Accessed December 3, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/july-web-only/sabella-nostalgia-spiritually-dangerous-covid-golden-calf.html>>.

⁷ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, No. 12.