

Keeping Christmas Well
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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13:17

I once read a hilarious prayer that begins, "Dear God, so far today, I've done all right. I've not gossiped, and I haven't lost my temper. I haven't been grumpy, nasty, or selfish, and I'm really glad of that! But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot of help. Amen." It's true that sometimes we need to remind ourselves before we even get out of bed that we're supposed to behave; sometimes we may need God's help to do it.

And I had to share this prayer as I thought about John the Baptist out there in the wilderness all week. John is famous for calling people to repent. John embodied the words of Isaiah Chapter 40 we hear in the Gospel of Luke. He was likely quite inspired by them— "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." [1] John was in the wilderness asking people to repent for the forgiveness of their sins.

And it's this theological concept of repentance that I'd like to consider today. Last week I told you that Advent is a time to think, reflect, and dig deeper, so in that spirit, we'll explore what it means to repent, and why we should consider repentance during Advent. After all, repentance or repent aren't words that we use every day. If you would go to someone you've wronged somehow and say, "I'm really sorry for what I said to you, and I'd like you to know that I've repented for it." People would probably think you're some crazy holy roller.

In the Bible there are two Hebrew and two Greek words we translate as "repent," but the original words have unique meanings and connotations. The two Hebrew words mean to regret or to turn back. The literal meaning of one of the Hebrew words, *nacham* (naw-kham) may have been to sigh, an expression of regret. [2] Think about it, when you do something you feel bad about or say something you immediately regret, don't you sometimes sigh when you realize what you've done? You sigh and regret your words or your actions—this is *nacham*.

In Greek the two words mean to think again or to change one's intentions. One of the Greek words *metanoeo* (met-an-o-eh'-o) comes from *meta*—again and *noeo*—to think. Repenting is thinking again about what you've said or done that caused harm. [3]

So why am I giving you a quick Hebrew and Greek vocabulary lesson this morning? Because we have four different words that we translate into English as plain and simple "repent," but repentance is actually a linguistically rich concept. To regret, to turn back, to think again, to change your intentions are all human experiences we've probably had in our lives—maybe this year, maybe this month, maybe this week, maybe today. So I don't want us to hear the word "repent" and think that John the Baptist was just some crazy, locust-eating, weirdo whose central message is no longer relevant. John's call to repentance matters today. Most of us have repented a time or two in our lives even if we wouldn't label it that way.

Marcus Borg discusses repentance in his book *Speaking Christian*. Borg asks whether or not we have to repent in order for our sins to be forgiven, or are we forgiven already because of God's unconditional love for us? Borg cites the great theologian Paul Tillich as he argues his case. Tillich once wrote, "We experience moments in which we accept ourselves, because we feel that we have been accepted by that which is greater than we. If only more such moments were given to us! For it is such moments that make us love our life, that make us accept

ourselves, not in our goodness and self-complacency, but in our certainty of the eternal meaning of our life." [4]

In his brilliant way, Paul Tillich tells us that we are already accepted and forgiven, and therefore repentance takes on some of those nuanced Greek and Hebrew meanings I just walked us through. Repenting is about the power to change one's intentions and to think again, as opposed to feeling deep shame and asking God to forgive us poor, miserable creatures. Borg defines repentance as "to turn, return to God and to go beyond the mind that we have and see things in a new way. . . We are forgiven already, loved and accepted by God. We don't need to do anything to warrant God's love. But repentance—turning and returning to God, going beyond the mind that we have—is the path that leads to transformation." [5]

So if we look at the Hebrew and Greek words for repentance, if we take to heart the affirming words of Paul Tillich, and if we consider Marcus Borg's wrestling with all of this vocabulary today, we discover something remarkable. We are already loved by God, accepted by God, and forgiven by God. No matter what we've done, no matter who we are—God's unconditional love for us is there already. Knowing this, feeling empowered by this, we can then return to God time and again when we get lost or go astray without fear or shame or even misgivings. Repenting is a modern, necessary way of being in this life after all. We can say a prayer to God when we wake up, "I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot of help" knowing that we are already accepted by the Ground of our Being.

I've often laughed when I've gotten lost while driving, which happens to me all the time and my GPS declares, "Turn around, when possible." On more than one occasion, I've thought or even said, "I would if I could!" Well I'm telling you today that repentance means that we can turn around and it's possible all the time! We can change our intentions and think again just in time for Christmas; this is what the Season of Advent gives us the time and space to do.

After all it's no coincidence that one of the greatest Christmas stories of all time is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and the reason it's so touching is because Ebenezer Scrooge has a complete and total change of heart. Dare I say he repents just in time for Christmas? Many of us may know the story by heart, my favorite movie version is *The Muppet Christmas Carol* with Michael Cain as Scrooge and Kermit the Frog as Bob Cratchit, but it's fine if that's not your favorite, though it really is the best.

Now the story begins with Ebenezer Scrooge sitting in his Counting House on Christmas Eve thinking of all the debts he has to collect. Poor Bob Cratchit and the rest of the book keepers are shivering in the other room because Scrooge won't even spend money on coals for the fire. Scrooge's nephew Fred visits, inviting him to a party and two men visit representing a charity stop by too, wondering if Scrooge would like to make a donation for the poor. He turns them all away, yelling "Bah Humbug!"

In the night Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley and three other ghosts—the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. These ghosts walk Scrooge through his life and show him the consequences of his actions— he sees in the past that he lost the love of his life over money. In the present, he realizes that Bob Cratchit has a crippled son named Tiny Tim that the family can barely afford to care for due to the meager salary Scrooge pays Bob Cratchit. Finally, Scrooge gets a glimpse of what the future will be like after he's gone. He hears people speaking ill of him, with some feeling relief or even happiness that he died.

Scrooge wakes up on Christmas morning safe in his bed, discovering that he has a second chance at redemption. He may not be able to change the past and some of the pains he's caused, but he can make things better in the present and the future will look a whole lot

brighter because of his repentance—his turning back, his return to love and compassion. Scrooge is about to completely transform his life and all those in it.

What I love about the ending of *A Christmas Carol* is that Scrooge sends a huge Christmas turkey over to the Cratchit house right away and eventually cares for Tiny Tim as if he were his own son. He gets dressed and rushes off to Fred's party to spread some Christmas cheer. In the Muppet version, Scrooge finds those men he had turned away before and donates a large amount of money to their charity out of sheer gratitude. Scrooge expresses his regret by becoming a compassionate person. And he experiences his transformation on Christmas Eve night, pretty good timing all things considered.

I think we'd all do well this Advent Season to think again and turn back to God and one another with peace in our hearts. We can turn back a bit easier knowing that we are already accepted, forgiven, and loved by the Ground of our Being in the first place. We could end up being as transformed and loving as Ebenezer Scrooge in the end of the story. As we're told by Charles Dickens, "It was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if anyone alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"[6] Amen.

[1] Luke 3:4-6.

[2] James Rowe Adams, "Repent and Repentance," in *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors*, 243.

[3] Adams, "Repent and Repentance" in *From Literal to Literary*, 244.

[4] Paul Tillich, "You are Accepted" in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=84>

[5] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored*, 159.

[6] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol (Abridged for Public Readings)*, <http://www.scroogeandmarley.org/>