

What Is Repentance?

Unlike many of my fellow seminary classmates, I enjoyed Hebrew classes. Not that I was ever going to be able to read, much less speak it...I love puzzles and trying to translate words on a page that went from right to left so the meaning could be found in words written left to right...it was a challenging puzzle. Much of what I learned has been lost as I mostly use to help me when a text's meaning seems to me to be not quite conveyed in the translation. But there are a couple of Hebrew words whose translations have stuck with me. Hebrew is such a concise language, most everything is based verbs formed by three letters forming a root. Repentance mentioned so often by the gospels as part of Jesus' teachings, is one of those. The Greek word used is μετανοεῖτε [meta,, noe,w] meaning: 'have a serious change of mind and heart about a previous point of view or course of behavior'. But to me the Hebrew gives a clearer image of what repentance looks like. Like all nouns it was based on one of those three letter verbs—to walk, but the letters attached gave a direction for the walking...and that was to walk in the opposite direction from the one that had previously been taken, a 180 degree turn. To repent was to return, go back, come back; it was a physical motion to the point of departure. Whenever the call to repentance comes within our scriptures, isn't that what is being asked? Aren't those in the audience being asked to turn back from their behaviors to those which are in accordance with what God has given them as guidance? The juxtaposition of the Matthew text staring John the Baptizer with those from Isaiah and Romans that we have before us today is interesting. In Isaiah, the beauty of the vision is breathtaking, expansive and hard to imagine as we look around us. In that peaceable kingdom, the poor will be judged with righteousness, there will be equity for the meek, the wolf will lie down with the lamb. When listening or watching the news from the Holy Land, from Ukraine, from Haiti...not to mention news about the violence and hatred which is erupting in our streets, schools and other places, I feel like crying at how far we are from the prophet's vision of God's promise realized. The kingdom of God doesn't seem near at all. When Paul in his letter to the Romans, prays God's blessing of harmony and welcome, I can't help but put that beside the call from so many to keep refugees out, build walls and deport immigrants and wonder how these sentiments and calls from our Lord to love one another can fit with this. Then I hear that call from John: "Repent!" That's when I realize how crooked a path I've been traveling. I hear, "Repent!" and I must, if I am even the least bit honest, I must hear it directed first and foremost at me. If I don't, then my citizenship will be among the brood of vipers. If I don't then I will always be calling out the specks in others from behind the log in my own eye. If I don't then I will always be that Pharisee grateful not to be the tax collector, that rich man immune and ignorant of the plight of Lazarus at my doorstep, the disciples intent on keeping children from bothering Jesus, a member of that crowd calling for the release of Barabbas and the conviction of Jesus, the unrepentant thief who is so close to touching the kingdom of God, but too self-absorbed to recognize it right beside him. John the Baptist's call affords us the opportunity on the second Sunday of Advent each year to hear what we need to hear among the carols and tinsel. He reminds in this new liturgical year that God loves us enough to hold us accountable, to be who and whose we are. Jesus is coming. We can be ready to meet him, not perfectly but honestly, knowing he comes with merciful judgment that frees us to imitate him, imperfectly, haltingly but surely better than we are doing. John the Baptist's call must first be heard by each of us

individually. We each need to respond and repent, in word and deed. Only then will we have a hope of living out our baptismal identity in ways that imitate Christ. Only then can the fire of Christ and the Holy Spirit burn our dross and transform it to light for the world. We need to look at both the Matthew reading and that of Isaiah carefully so that we understand that the promise inherent in Isaiah of God's grace and the judgment found in Matthew that calls for repentance are both meant for God's people to hear in their present...not as either some "over the rainbow" happening in another time or place or grace not tethered to judgement which leads to that repentance. They are included in our scriptures and are for us because they tell us who God is and where God is taking God's people; giving a-vision that will make possible full life in the present, both then and now. Sure, that peaceable kingdom is not present now for it promises to be a return to Eden as described in Revelation by John of Patmos as what comes to pass when God descends to live among us again beyond history. But we anticipate its coming now in faith because it is God's own promise to us. Through looking to that future, it can have a present effect now. God keeps showing us a world of peace where rulers and people care for one another, for the poor and needy, for creation and all its creatures. What if we moved into that world even now? True, our world remains compromised and dangerous, and we do have to deal with that in appropriate ways. Yet to the degree we find the courage to see God's vision, we can invite God's future into the present and practice it with one another now. Isaiah's visions of the peaceable kingdom are found among the pronouncements of judgment—the calling out people for their behavior. Isaiah 10: 1-2 tells us why judgment will come: "Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed among my people, so that widows may be their spoil and that they may plunder the orphans." There those governing supported the rich and powerful becoming more powerful at the expense of the already poor and marginalized. The wealth and power gap extended to such a degree that the powerful were able to codify laws to justify their injustice. Does that sound like something that remained in the 8th century with Isaiah's audience? Yet, even so, God promises through the prophet that "a shoot will come from Jesse's and therefore David's stem and a branch will grow from those roots. At one time the Jewish people believed King Hezekiah would be the one to save them. Yet in Jesus' time they lived under the oppressive rule of Rome instead of Assyria. Into that condition, into a family too poor to present the prime ritual offering for the birth of a son, a child was born and grew to proclaim the Kingdom of God with its ways of justice and faithfulness. Just as in those days, we are waiting for that dawn in which war shall cease, but when reading that proclamation can we see that God has always been calling God's people to justice and faithfulness, and always promises to send leaders who will show the way? It is such a leader that we look for during Advent, preparing to welcome him as we seek how we can better follow his lead. It is important to note the leader Isaiah describes will judge with righteousness and equity... but not relying on what his eyes can see or his ears hear...because those who most suffer injustice and inequality under the usual working of our world are those who are not seen or heard by us or in our society. Those are the ones who formed Jesus' family, they are the ones with whom he spent his time of ministry, those are the ones his teachings directed us to see and hear. As has often been pointed out, when it comes to taking care of the basic needs of our neighbors, the Bible's instructions are not exactly rocket science. Those images in the peaceable kingdom arise when justice and righteousness arrive among us. So when we move

to the Matthew text we find Isaiah's words waiting for us telling us there is a prophet in the wilderness who has come to prepare the way for the appearance of the Lord. John's voice called the people to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." And people went out into the wilderness to hear him; confessing their sin and being baptized by him in the Jordan River. The Jewish root and understanding of repentance is one reason why John's location in the wilderness was so important to the early believers. The people of Israel had spent 40 years in the wilderness learning God's ways; in exile as they made their way from the wilderness of oppression or estrangement back into freedom they were reconnecting with their God. In this way, what John was proclaiming was God's invitation than threat. Repent, the prophet cries, come home. Repent God calls, turn to me. Repent, we hear, walk into your freedom. To repent then means to return from exile to the place and peace of God's presence. To repent, to return, is to follow the prepared way that leads out of our separateness or estrangement back into a reconnection with the One who made us and loves us beyond our comprehension. Of course, John's proclamation did not stop there but is always linked to the why: it is because God' kingdom is near; God is waiting for us to turn to those ways shown us.

In John's proclamation however, the note sounded is not gentle toward some in his audience. In fact, forgiveness is not mentioned when he addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees who come to him for baptism but calls them a "brood of vipers." Perhaps he sees that they have not actually accepted their need to repent but are relying on their status as Abraham's descendants. Within Judaism repentance is recognized requiring five elements: recognition of one's sins as sins, remorse, confession, desisting from sin and then offering restitution where possible. "Recognition of one's sins as sins" is an act of one's intelligence and moral conscience. It involves knowing that certain actions are sinful, recognizing such actions in oneself as more than just lapses of praxis, and analyzing one's motives for sin as deeply as one can. For example, stealing from someone must be seen not only as a crime but also as a sin against another human and a violation of God's demands of us within the covenant. It also involves realizing that such acts are part of deeper patterns of relatedness and that they are motivated by some of the most profound and darkest elements in our being. "Remorse" is a feeling composed of feelings of regret, of failure to maintain one's moral standards. It may also encompass feelings of being lost or as a feeling of being alienated from God and from our own deepest spiritual roots, of having abandoned our own inner selves. "Confession" has two forms: ritual and personal. Ritual confession requires recitation of the liturgies of confession at their proper moments in the prayer life of the community. These are often part of our worship, yet frequently those "confessing" may not see themselves in these prayers. Personal confession requires individual confession before God as needed. The more specific the personal confession is the better. Those are the elements many acknowledge as repentance basics; the remaining elements are often more difficult. "Desisting from sin" is neither a moral-intellectual analysis nor a feeling; it is an action. The action of walking back to the path God has shown. It is a ceasing from sin, a desisting from the patterns of sinful action to which we have become addicted. Desisting from sin involves actually stopping sinful action, consciously repressing thoughts and fantasies about the sinful activity, and making a firm commitment never to commit the sinful act again. "Restitution" is the act of making good, as best one can, for any damage done through the sin. These elements result in a changed orientation directing vision

and actions away from the past and toward God's vision and promise of a new beginning. Talk of a new orientation leads to the second theme of John the Baptist's proclamation: his calling his audience to "bear fruit" worthy of repentance. What shape this repentance takes in lives of those who repent is seen in the "fruit" which follows. The promises of God are a matter of grace and gift, so what is the responsibility of the one who has repented in response to God's gift and grace. Here repentance and fruit belong together. The bearing of fruit means above all not to be enslaved to the past, to be open to what God is doing and will do. Repentance means to assume responsibility for the future. "Do not presume upon your status as children of Abraham" John says. The new orientation will cause "good fruit" to come forth, out of the transforming power of God which links "being" children of God and bearing fruit; the walking by God's guidance, the following and doing according to God's ways. There is a link between faith and action which Matthew will lift up to us as we walk through Jesus' life and ministry with him this year. This is the wholeness of following Christ's light which came into our darkness. In most ways, repentance is concerned less with what was done wrong in the past but is instead concerned with what is being done now, with what is right and important and necessary about what is done differently because what is now done is in step with God. Our confidence in God's offer of repentance is based on a deep trust in God's goodness which is always more powerful than any of our badness; that God's power to heal us and make us new is always stronger than our power to mess up or to stay stuck in darkness. For God's abundant love and grace, we give thanks, and we turn our eyes toward the light Christ brought into our darkness and seek for our fruit to shine that reflected light as we walk back toward our Lord. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.