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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20
“*Metanoia*”

The sermon today is a tale of two cities message. It’s about two approaches to the concept of “repentance.”

The first approach appears in the Hebrew story read by Ani where we get a typical Jewish view of repentance. People are seen as evil by God and God intends to destroy them and so he sends an emissary, Jonah, to warn them of his intention. The people heed the warning and repent with sackcloth and ashes and God offers a reprieve.

The people see their evil ways and they repent and they’re restored. God wants to hear: “I’m sorry.” This form of repentance continues as a powerful component in Jewish and Christian spirituality today. It contributes to healing. That’s the power of the confessional in the Catholic Church (attested to by psychologists) and the power of saying prayers of confession in worship services.

We saw the need expressed by New Orleans Saints fan and journalist, Renee Peck, in an op ed. article in the Chronicle this week. She was one of the strong voices who decried the insulting and threatening behavior of 49er fans at last week’s 49er/Saints game. It’s been quite a week of back-and-forth between 49er and Saints fans in columns and letters to the editor.

Peck describes going back to her hotel and being overheard by a local when she described the ill-treatment at the stadium. “I can’t believe that,” protested the local. “We had a lovely conversation with the Saints couple behind us.”

Peck writes: “I’m sure she did. We had some cordial ones in our section, too. But what she should have said to us was, ‘I’m so sorry.’” The article appeared on Wednesday and since then there have been a host of apologies in the paper.

Repentance is about saying sorry to others and to God not only for one’s own transgressions but for the transgressions of others. I’m sorry that people are killed in global wars and conflicts. I’m sorry about domestic violence against women, also a subject of current San Francisco politics.

I'm sorry that 20 percent of the US population is living in poverty. The litany continues.

Hebrew Biblical repentance continues through the New Testament and into our spiritual lives today. Evil is perceived and we confess the evil and move on to reconstitute ourselves and the world through our lives and public policy connected to God who cares for a world of peace and loving justice.

The second approach to "repentance" is spoken by Jesus in the Gospel passage today. Although there are similarities, it's not a simple sin/repentance dynamic. Jesus says: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Repentance, here, has a larger context.

Jesus returns to Galilee following his 40 days in the wilderness, ready to begin his mission to proclaim the "good news." He announces that the moment has finally come for God to retake control over the world that God created. Because the time (*kairos*) was right, Jesus ministry could begin. Repentance follows Jesus' announcement that the time has arrived and the realm of God is among us.

He contrasts his view of the "kingdom" with the political "kingdom" set up by Herodian dynasty. The kingdom or realm of God that Jesus proclaims is not bolstered by the construction of monumental buildings and great cities. God's realm is manifest in the human embrace of God's rule through repentance and faith.

Jesus' mission is to call people to repentance, that is, a total reorientation of their lives so that they will be in a position to accept God's sovereign rule authentically.

Jesus is not pointing to the evil ways or sins of the people. Instead, he sets a new standard. The choice is the kingdom of Roman rule or the realm of God.

How many of us have read stories of saints like Mother Teresa or Martin Luther Kings Jr. or St. Francis of Assisi or Archbishop Desmond Tutu and feel our lack of engagement or courage and are inspired to do better with our lives. Jesus shows the people the realm of God in contrast with the realm of Herod and the people are moved to repentance and are encouraged to be about the good news of God, in other words, to make the realm of God a reality in the world.

The title of this sermon is "*Metanoia*" because I wanted to emphasize the Greek way of looking at "repentance." It's the word used in the Gospel

text. The Jewish version emphasized in Jonah and ironically in traditional Roman Catholic faith is the “*mea culpa*” version, a Latin phrase that translates into English as “my mistake” or “my fault” stated in the popular Roman Rite:

“I confess to almighty God
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have greatly sinned,
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,
through my fault, through my own fault,
through my own most grievous fault;
therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin,
all the Angels and Saints,
and you, my brothers and sisters,
to pray for me to the Lord our God.”

While this has its place, *metanoia* is more positive and for Jesus it has a greater context.. Simply stated *metanoia* is a change of mind, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of outlook of an individual's vision of the world and of her/himself, and a new way of loving others and the universe.

There is less chest thumping and more turning into a positive view of our place in *God's* world. If we need to confess (and we often need to) we do so and get on with *God's* good work of proclaiming the good news in word and deed.

Metanoia in the context of the realm of God is usually accompanied by the desire to change one's lifestyle, for one now sees in a wholly different way or frame of mind. Most times this is a move from a material outlook to a spiritual one, but if a spiritual outlook was already had then it becomes more focused in the truth.

Metanoia includes an intense emotion and awareness of forgiveness, going both ways. One automatically forgives all who wronged him or her and it also desires forgiveness from others. The Christ-soul understands suffering and knows that others who wronged one did so out of suffering and ignorance, and one also understands if others cannot forgive, and it thus accepts that fact and can move on...

Metanoia is overcoming fear. And we know that others have similar fears that they have to overcome and we try to help them do so, but first and foremost we do no harm, that is, we don't make matters worse, and thus oftentimes the ethical thing to do is simply to love them, to be compassionate to them.

While I don't discount the Jonah and the journalist's view of repentance, especially the aspect that we are all in this boat together, I like Jesus' definition in the word "*metanoia*" because it pushes repentance and us to the level of moving on from *mea culpa* to action.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." God's time, the realm of God and repentance ("*metanoia*") and faith are spoken in the same breath. Repentance really is about building God's realm and proclaiming the good news than it is about looking for and dwelling on sin in the world and in our selves. Amen.