

Title: Matthew 4:12-23

Sunday: Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” Jesus begins his public ministry, according to Matthew’s Gospel, with words that are not gentle advice or abstract theology. They are startling in their simplicity and their urgency. Repent!

Not someday. Not after you die. Not once you get your life together. The kingdom of heaven has come near. Today. Which means that repentance may not be a threat. Maybe it is an invitation.

I need to be really honest here and confess that one of the reasons I went to seminary was for ammunition. Yes, I felt the call and yes, I wanted to serve God in ordained ministry. But I knew that the people who don't think like me-vote like me-the people who don't want the same kind of change as me-were blisteringly wrong, and I could use the Bible to put them in their place. There was a part of me that needed to settle the score. I knew that knowledge was power. And I needed weaponry.

So imagine my surprise when I got to seminary and to this passage and this word. **Repent.** I knew what it meant and what it meant was that my enemies would fall to their knees in shame and defeat. **Repent.** But. The word Jesus uses in the Greek is metanoia. It does not mean moral self-flagellation. It does not mean humiliation. It does not even primarily mean behavior change.... Metanoia means to change one’s mind, but not in the shallow sense of changing an opinion. It means a radical reorientation of consciousness. A transformation in how we see God, power, ourselves, one another, and the world.

So instead of “repent for the kingdom of heaven is near,” this passage might read “reorient and realign your entire life because reality itself has changed, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

The kingdom of heaven has come near, and therefore the old maps no longer work. You simply cannot keep seeing the world the same way and expect to live in this new reality. And so the great ammunition I learned in seminary was that **I** needed to repent.

Repentance is not about being bad. It is about being out of alignment with what is good and true and holy. And once we understand that everything begins to open. It’s like letting go of a way of life that can no longer hold the fullness of what God is offering.

This is important, because repentance often shows up in our lives not as guilt, but as a clinging restlessness. Do you know that feeling? A sense that the way we’ve been living, even if it once worked, is no longer sufficient. Repentance is what happens when we dare to ask: What if the world is more

generous than I was taught? What if power works differently than I assumed? What if love is not scarce? Repentance is a reorientation towards capital T truth. This is why repentance changes everything once you know how to see it.

And it can show up in the most unexpected places. My personal favorite holiday classic is ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’. I love the Grinch and sometimes I AM the Grinch. The Grinch does not repent because he is scolded or punished. He repents because his heart grows. His capacity expands. He suddenly sees joy, love, and belonging that he could not perceive before. “And what happened then? Well, in Whoville they say that the Grinch’s small heart grew 3 sizes that day.”

This is repentance. Not shame. Not fear. But expanded vision. And because he sees differently, he acts differently. He returns what is stolen. He makes amends. He enters community. He becomes a different person, while somehow becoming more fully himself. Metanoia.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of working as an artist-in-residence at a parochial school, teaching children how to write poetry using the Psalms as a model. One little boy wrote a poem entitled “The Monster Who Was Sorry.” He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response (in the poem) is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes, “Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’” “My messy house”...Norris observes. “With more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and gave him a way out... he was well on his way toward repentance, not a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, why not clean it up? Why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?”

This, too, is repentance. Not self-hatred. Not denial. But an honest recognition followed by possibility. So, true repentance, true reorientation, true metanoia, begins with truth-telling. About our fear. Our jealousy. Our resentment. Our desire for control. Our habits of harm. Our exhaustion. Our grief. And then it leans forward.

Because repentance always has a future. This is where repentance moves from our interior lives into the world we actually inhabit. Into our homes. Our families. Our workplaces. Our politics. Which is why repentance is never merely personal.

Jesus does not call only individuals to repent. He confronts entire systems of power. Empires. Economies. Religious structures. Ways of organizing the world that rely on domination, fear, and exclusion.

We know this. We feel this. We are living, right now, in a moment where power is worshiped. Where strongmen are celebrated. Where cruelty is confused with strength. Where whole nations are being invited to trade humility for dominance.

And the gospel does not allow us to pretend this is spiritually neutral. Fascism and totalitarianism are not just political failures. They are moral failures, theological failures, spiritual failures. They claim what belongs to God alone, they replace ultimate love with false loyalty, redemptive love with vengeful violence.

When Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” he is saying that these systems must also radically reorient. That domination is not the way. That fear is not a path to safety. That violence will never produce peace.

A world that truly repents—a world that reorients its understanding of power and belonging—is a world with no war and no hunger, no sexism or racism, no us versus them. Not because everyone suddenly becomes perfect, but because the underlying story has profoundly changed.

And it is ongoing. We do not repent once and arrive. We repent again and again and again, layer by layer by layer, as new truth becomes visible to us.

The invitation, then, is not to scour your life for sin, but to notice. Where have you already repented without naming it? Where has your heart grown? Where have you softened? Where have you released a story that no longer served you? And where, right here right now, is something in you crying out for reorientation? Is it anger? Envy? Fear? Is it a hunger for power or control? Is it despair masquerading as realism?

And what can we bring before God with this humility? Not to be crushed, but to be healed? Because every time we repent, every time we reorient our lives toward truth and love, we come nearer. Nearer to one another. Nearer to justice. Nearer to joy. Nearer to the prayer we keep praying: On earth, as it is in heaven.

Sometimes this kingdom feels impossibly far away. In Minneapolis. In Washington DC. In Memphis. And sometimes—sometimes—it is so close you can almost taste it. You can see it in your child at play. In laughing and dancing and loving on each other. In mutual aid, in communities choosing repair over revenge, love over hatred. In Minneapolis. In Washington DC. In Memphis. These are not accidents. These are glimpses.

Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. I’m so glad I got reoriented in seminary. And I’m so glad we get to glimpse the kingdom of heaven together. Because this—THIS— is the good great astonishing news of the Gospel. Thanks be to God.

