**Repentance: Who? When? What? Why? How?**

**Joel 2:12-17; Matthew 4:1-11**

2/18/15

Thought for Meditation:

“Repent” is among the stock imperatives in the spiritual life… It simply means “turn around” or “change your mind.” In the biblical story repentance cannot be narrowed down to something private, such as being sorry for your sins and ready to make amends. The call is to return to God and the ways of God with his people… It has to do with entering a new way of life, taking up membership in the kingdom of God.

*Eugene Peterson, Tell It Slant,” p118-119*

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Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Lent was the time that the early church used to prepare new converts to join the church. It is a time when we remember the forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness and was tempted by Satan, the story I just read from Matthew. It is also a time to prepare for Holy Week as we remember Jesus death and resurrection. One of the traditional practices used to prepare involves a word with deep Biblical roots, yet a word that has fallen out of favor in our modern world – repentance. Our passage from Joel, which is often read on Ash Wednesday, is essentially a call to repent. Listen to the word of God from the second chapter of Joel.

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

I want to explore this passage with five questions: Who? When? What? Why? And How?

First of all, who is God calling to repent? Joel was very clear. Everyone was expected to repent. It wasn’t just the obvious sinners and the blatantly rebellious people. All the people of Israel needed to turn their lives back toward God. He talks about gathering the people, the whole congregation. He even includes people who are not normally included. The aged, old people who might not be able to leave their homes. Children, even infants. The bride and the groom. Normally, a newlywed couple was excused from any public service. They were not required to participate in the public festivals. Joel, realizing how serious the problem was, said that even those who are not usually expected to participate must join in the repentance.

All of us are called to repent. I think that is difficult for many of us to understand. Most of us are basically good people. We know we aren’t perfect, but we aren’t terrorists. We aren’t raping and pillaging. We aren’t robbing banks or pushing drugs. Yet the truth is, all of us are sinners. All of us sin. And so the question of who should repent includes you and it includes me. All of us need to take an honest look at our lives and change, turning away from our sin.

The second question is when? When should we repent? Joel gave a very simple answer. “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.” The situation in Joel was urgent. A plague of locusts had just come through and wiped out all their crops. They were facing the possibility of a famine. They were also expecting the Day of the Lord to come at any moment. It would bring judgment and punishment. Joel said, one disaster has already come, another one, even worse, might come at any time. Therefore, repent now, today?

I think this sense of urgency is difficult for those of us who live in a relatively safe, affluent, and comfortable world. After September 11th there was an increase in spiritual interest. For several weeks after 911, attendance at worship was up. But it didn’t last long. We’ve waited 2000 years for the return of Christ, and let’s be honest, it is hard to keep the expectation that Jesus could return at any moment at the front of our life and faith. However, I would suggest that the call to repentance is just as valid and just as urgent today. We don’t know what the future holds, so turn back to God now, today, before it is too late.

Third is the question what? What should we expect if we repent? For Joel, this was a difficult question, and he offered no guarantees. “Who knows whether God will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind” (Joel 2:14). Maybe God will change his mind and not bring the disaster. Maybe he won’t.

As Christians, I think this is the most difficult, and disturbing, part of the passage. Yet I think it really does fit our experiences. We’ve probably all had times when we have prayed urgently for something, and God didn’t seem to answer our prayer, or at least the way we had hoped. Our lives sometimes are filled with pain and struggles, even when we have repented of our sin and turned our hearts to God. There are times when God acts in ways that we do not understand. And so, we can join with Joel in saying, “Maybe God will bless us and protect us. Maybe He won’t. There is no guarantee.”

Yet, as Christians, I believe we do have some promises we can cling to, promises we can rely upon.

* If we confess our sins God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
* Jesus said, I am with you always, even to the close of the age. And so we believe the promise that he will never leave us nor forsake us.
* If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.

We must recognize, with Joel, that we can’t control God. Our acts of repentance, or love, or speaking words of truth can’t make God act in a certain way. Yet in Jesus Christ we do have the promise of God’s love and the hope of eternal life.

Why should we repent? That is the fourth question and the meaning of the word “repent” is part of the answer. To repent means to turn around. You are going this direction, on this path, and you are headed in the wrong way. You’re headed away from God. Therefore you need to turn around and head toward God.

It is easy for us to claim that God is the most important part of our lives and that we are on the right path to God. It is quite another thing to actually live that out in the reality of our lives. It takes some honest self-reflection. Look at your calendar. Does the way you spend your time show that God is the most important part of your life? Could someone look at your wallet or your checkbook, at how you spend your money, and say that it is obvious that you were a Christian? If you looked at all your thoughts, the things you spend your time thinking about, would it be obvious that your relationship with Jesus Christ is the most important relationship in your life?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls us to “be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.” If we are honest with ourselves we have to admit that we are not perfect. We are not 100% faithful and obedient. Therefore we need to repent, by turning away from our sins and turning toward Jesus Christ. Why repent? So that the ultimate goal of your life, your final outcome, is the kingdom of God, and a relationship with the King.

There is another, even better, reason why we can and should repent. Joel says, “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” This description of God has some of the great biblical words. Grace is more common in the New Testament, but the basic idea includes feeling sympathy or compassion. It involves granting someone a favor. The Hebrew word mercy has its root in the word for a mother’s womb. In other words, God’s mercy is like a mother’s love for her children. God is slow to anger. The Hebrew word for anger actually means large nostrils. When you get angry your nostrils tend to flare. God goes a long time before he gets angry. It is another way of saying that God is patient with us, even when we sin and turn away from God. Steadfast love is one of the great words of the Old Testament. It describes God’s covenant relationship, his commitment to us. This is who God is. We may not know exactly what God is going to do, but we do know that our God is full of grace and mercy. God is patient and abounding in steadfast love. Therefore repent. Turn away from your sin, turn away from anything and everything that keeps you from focusing your attention on God’s love for you in Jesus Christ.

Finally, how? How should we repent? Joel gives many examples of how to repent. It includes fasting, weeping and mourning. He talks about gathering for worship, praying and humbling ourselves before God. Joel is very clear, however, that the primary concern is not with visible actions. I heard a story years ago ab out a five-year-old boy who was filled with energy and couldn’t sit still. One time he went on a plane ride with his mother. She was not a strong enough mom to make him sit still. He ran up and down the aisles creating havoc amongst the passengers and with the crew. Finally the flight attendant put him in his seat, fastened his seat belt and made him stay put. A few minutes later she walked back down the aisle and he sat there, glowering. He looked at her and said “You can make me sit here. I’m sitting on the outside but I’m running and yelling on the inside.”

God desires not just outward actions, but an inward change. God is concerned with the condition of our hearts, so he tells us to return with all our heart, to rend our hearts, not our clothes. Repentance includes something we do, that others can see. It also involves a change of attitude and outlook.

I can’t tell you how you need to repent, or what you need to do. That is between you and God. It will be different for all of us. It should include some sort of formal and outward, action; fasting, spending extra time in prayer or reading scripture, serving the poor, the helpless, the lonely, giving extra money to the church. Your repentance should also include some sort of self-reflection; listening to what God wants to say to you. Ask God to show you if there is any sin that is keeping you from God, sins that are keeping you from the path of eternal life. Ask God to reveal to you if there are good things in your life that you have made more important than God. However you sense that God is calling you to repent I encourage you to use Lent as a time to prepare for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Repent by returning to the Lord with all your heart. “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”