

Acts 3:12-19 (New International Version)

¹²When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ¹³The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. ¹⁶By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.

¹⁷"Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. ¹⁹Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

This is the Word of God and it can be trusted (Thanks be to God)

One of my favorite stories is in the setting of a small country, white-frame church. It seems that the paint was about gone on the old church so the people asked the pastor what to do. He suggested that they have a work day on the coming Saturday and paint the church. The people agreed.

On Saturday an eager crowd starting painting the church, but as the afternoon wore on they realized that they would not have enough paint to finish the job. They asked the pastor what to do. He said, "Well, this is water-based paint so let's add water and thin the paint some. Maybe we will have enough to finish that way."

Sure enough, they were able to finish the paint job. As they departed for the day, the people took one last look to admire their handiwork. The church looked beautiful.

But not long after they left, a huge thunderstorm broke over the church and the downpour washed most of the fresh paint off the church.

When the people arrived the next day, they were understandably distraught. They asked the preacher what they were going to do now. The preacher, in his best, ministerial cadence replied, "Re-paint, re-paint, and thin no more!"

Let Us Pray

Lord of Light and Mercy, be with us this day as we again hear the stories of faith and sight. Help us to believe in your abiding presence with us, both in our darkness and in the light which you bring. Give us courage and strength to turn away from those things in our lives that keep us from knowing you fully and which hinder our relationship with you. Guide us and help us to witness to your resurrection. For we offer this in Jesus' Name, AMEN.

Our text for today deals with the theme of repentance. In fact, repentance is a prominent theme throughout much of the book of Acts.

When Peter first began preaching, he says that we need to deal with our sin before new life comes in our hearts. In Acts 2:38, Peter says, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

In our text for today, Acts 3:19 says, "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord..."

Later, when Paul was preaching before the Aeropagus in Acts 17, he says, "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent (17:30)."

First, what is repentance? Let me give you an illustration as a definition.

Imagine we are driving in the dark, and we are worried about the route we are to take. But we finally discover the right highway number – Highway 16. We relax because we are finally on the right road. As we speed along, we do not find the expected towns at the right time. Apprehension mounts, until finally our worst fears are confirmed when we find a sign that indicates we are approaching a town in the opposite direction. We are on exactly the right road but we are going in exactly the wrong direction. There is nothing to do but turn around and head back the other way.

This is a perfect picture of what repentance means: a turning around of life from going in the wrong direction to going in the right direction.

The word repentance as used in both Old and New Testaments means basically a "turning to God."

I. Repentance as Turning from the Past

In the story, we were on a perfectly good road, smooth and wide and straight. It may be the best road in the state. Furthermore, it is the right road, not some detour or side road leading nowhere.

There are many other motorists traveling with us in the same direction. We are obeying every traffic law. Our automobile is functioning properly. We are enjoying a delightful conversation. We seem to be making good progress.

But despite all of those positive feelings there is one fatal flaw: By continuing as we are going, we will never reach our destination. Although everything seems to be fine, unless there is

a fundamental change of direction, we will utterly fail in our plans.

The spiritual parallel is just as vivid. In setting the course of life, most people choose a well-traveled road that seems to offer many advantages. Our intentions are good. We are not bothering anybody else.

But after a time, life just doesn't turn out the way we expected. Telltale signs along the way begin to suggest that merely to continue more of the same year after year will not get us where we want to go. Then some sign comes along that indicates plainly that we are headed in the wrong direction, that more of the same will actually make the problem worse.

It is not a matter of doing what we are doing better. It is not a matter of a little fix-up. We must turn completely around.

We have to turn from the past. At one time a woman of unsavory experience was delicately but cruelly referred to as "having a past." But in fact, everyone has a past.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote a poem which said:

"There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it behooves all of us not to talk about the rest of us."

Yes if we are honest, we have to admit it. We all have a past that we don't know how to get over. The Christian faith has a great suggestion about dealing with our past. We can repent.

Repentance begins with the recognition that life is moving in the wrong direction - no matter how long we have been doing it, no matter how many others may be doing the same thing, no matter how contented we are with our situation.

It also involves the willingness to analyze where life is really heading. Repentance speaks to an urgent need which we all feel to reorient life so that it will be centered around the right goals, centered around God.

To repent does not mean to admit that we have done something worse than anybody else. Rather, it means to step back and take stock, to evaluate the present direction of life, and then to decide if we are headed in the right direction.

II. Repentance as Turning toward the Future

Let's return to our travel story. After realizing that we are headed in the wrong direction, we are frustrated by our terrible mistake. We might stop the car and scold ourselves for our stupidity. We may blame someone riding in the car with us. We might accuse the Highway Department of not making the road signs clearer.

But none of this finger pointing will do us any good. Instead of fussing at ourselves, our spouse, or the world in general, what we really need is to turn around and travel in the opposite direction. Something better awaits us in the opposite direction.

In the same way, many people never get around to repenting either because they are looking for somebody to blame for their situation. The blame game doesn't get us headed in the right direction.

Or imagine this scene. We realize that we are headed in the wrong direction, but we decide to continue on this road anyway! We might say, "Well, we are headed in the wrong direction, but

let's just keep going and see if we get there anyway." Some people are so set in their ways that they are willing to settle for second best. Some people keep expecting new results from the same old behaviors. "This is just the way I am. I'll keep doing the same thing over and over again, but maybe I'll get different results this time." It won't happen!

We need assurance that a finer destination awaits us in the future if only we will abandon the way that we have been going in the past. Notice the last part of our key verse, Acts 3:19:

"Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord..."

Jesus presents a different future in Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." Jesus did not say, "Repent because of your past." Rather, he said, "Repent, because God is about to do something wonderful!"

In repentance, we have not only a dissatisfaction with the way things have been going, but also a yearning from something better in life. All of us want a future that is better than our past. So the possibility of entering the kingdom of God offers a reason to break with the past and redirect our lives. Now we have fresh commitments that point life in a different direction. Now we have a better option that awaits us if we will turn in a new direction.

As long as we focus on our mistakes we are going to be immobilized by our guilt. Only as we turn from our present course and look in a new direction will we discover an alternative compelling enough to call us away from our mistaken path.

III. Repentance as a Turning around in the Present

Once we learn that repentance is good news rather than bad news, we are more likely to accept this option of turning around. But such change is never easy. In fact, it may be frightening.

Our situation may be like the circus act with the daring young man on the flying trapeze. He swings through the air with the greatest of ease. But at the critical moment he lets go of one

swinging bar and turns in mid-air to reach out for another. That heart-stopping twist far above the crowds is risky business, but taking such a leap is what repentance is all about.

It is giving up what we have - which is safe, secure and certain - for what we don't have - which is unsafe, insecure and uncertain. But such risky turning is at the heart of real repentance.

In a Jewish prayer book called *The Gates of Repentance*, we find this paragraph:

"Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves, birds and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. And this is always painful. It means saying I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.

These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways."

IV. Why Repent?

I have one last point to make today. Why should we repent? I have tried to present the logic of repentance. We can never get to our real goals if we just continue doing the same things we have always done. If we keep going down that road in this direction, we will never get to our destination. But we should also consider God. When we go the wrong way in life we break the heart of God. And we should care so much about God that we don't want to break God's heart.

Walter Wangerin once told about an experience he had with his son, Matthew. When Matthew was seven years old and in the second grade, he became fascinated with comic books--so much so, that one day he stole some from the library. When Walter found the comic books in Matthew's room, he confronted him, corrected him, disciplined him, and took him back to the library to return the books. Matthew received a stern lecture regarding stealing from the librarian and also from his dad.

The following summer, however, it happened again. Matthew stole some comic books from a resort gift shop. Again Walter corrected him, told him how wrong it was to steal and made him return the magazines.

A year later, Matthew once again stole some comic books from a drug store. Walter decided he had to do something to get his son's attention and to underscore the seriousness of stealing. So he took Matthew into his study and said, "Matthew, I have never spanked you before, and I don't want to now, but somehow I've got to get through to you and help you see how wrong it is to steal." So Walter bent Matthew over and spanked him five times with his bare hand. Matthew's eyes moistened with tears, and he sat there looking at the floor. His father sensed that his son did not want to cry in front of his father, so he said, "Matthew, I'm going to leave you alone for a little while. You sit here, and I'll be back in a few minutes."

With that, he stepped out of the study and closed the door behind him. Once out the door, he says that he was overcome at the thought of what he had just done. He, himself, broke down

and cried uncontrollably. When he had regained his composure, he went into the bathroom and washed his face. Then he went back into the study to talk to his son.

From that moment on, Matthew never stole again. Years later, as Matthew and his mother were driving home from shopping, they talked about some memories of his childhood. They remembered the incident with the comic books. Matthew said, "Mom, after that, I never stole anything again from anybody, and I never will."

His mother asked, "Was it because your dad spanked you that day?"

"Oh no," Matthew explained, "It was because I heard him crying!"

We repent because God loves us. Let's don't break God's heart.