

"Repentance: Coming Home"

For a few decades preachers have been trying to rescue the word repent from its typical meanings of 'feeling bad, very, very bad,' and bring it back to its historical and etymological meaning of 'turn around.'

Others have in various places taken the time to put this word in, what I think may be, its correct context: the language of exile.

The story of the Bible is the constant story of exile and homecoming. From the day we were kicked out of Eden, we were cast into exile. Then we were kicked out of 'East of Eden.' Then we were scattered from Babel. Then off to Egypt. Then off to Babylon.

Woven into the geographic exiles are the strains of spiritual and moral exiles. The People of God are always going astray. Geographically, figuratively, and spiritually. And, the call of the scriptures - the call of God - is always: Repent. Turn around. Come home.

It's what Israel did when led by Moses through the Red Sea and the wilderness. They went home. It's what the great city of Nineveh did when Jonah preached the shortest sermon in the history of preaching that we heard this morning "*Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*" *And the people of Nineveh believed God and turned around...and God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them: and he did not do it.*" They returned to God.

It's what the Prodigal Son did. He repented. He turned back. He went home.

Thus, when Jesus begins his preaching career, he summons the language of exile, and tells his people, the People of God, to "come home."

Why? Because the Kingdom of God is near.

What does that have to do with anything?

The Kingdom of God IS our home.

If we're honest with ourselves, we really don't like to think of God and Heaven being close. We don't like it being all that far away either, but we like to keep Heaven at arm's length. We like to keep God at arms length.

It's why when people curse around me they feel the need to apologize. They think they've just sinned a little too close to someone they think is closer to God than they are.

(Oh, boy. I sure have them fooled!)

It's why when people come into church after a long time away they make jokes about the roof caving in, or lightning striking. They think they've crossed a holy barrier, and gotten closer than maybe they should be.

I think it's one of the reasons why we like Christmas - because Jesus is just a little cute baby. The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. AND he isn't asking us to DO anything either. And that's nice.

I think that if we thought about it, the two most comfortable days of the church year are Christmas and Holy Saturday. Because on those two days Jesus is out-of-reach. He's either a powerless infant, or dead in a tomb. Either way, on those two days we're 'safe.'

But, Jesus' proclamation is "it's close." God is close. He's with us always, even to the end of the age. If we could only get our heads around the fact that he's our HOME, turning around, repenting, would be so much more an event of joy.

For repenting is our homecoming.

This strange reading we hear from Corinthians says, *let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.*” Why would Paul have written these words? The early followers in the Jesus communities were certain that the nearness of the kingdom meant that Jesus is coming back any day so don't be that concerned about the status of your life on earth....Christ is coming soon and these human and worldly structures will be cast away.

However, we've learned since those early times that Christ's coming back was not an immediate physical reality. Our modern understanding of kingdom is that the kingdom is here now and it's our responsibility to make it happen as much as we can on earth now. Our return from exile is here and now....our homecoming is now not something that comes from the skies, but here and now.

This is where our first reading comes into play. The story of Jonah is a story of God calling him to go to Ninevah. Now Jonah doesn't want to go. Ninevah is an evil city the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, an empire that had conquered the lands of Canaan where Jonah lived. God called him in effect to go to his enemies and preach repentance. Rather than listen to God's call, he traveled north on his way to Tarshish heading the opposite direction from Ninevah. He was traveling there by boat from Jaffa...a storm came up and the boat was in danger of foundering, so the men threw Jonah overboard since he revealed he didn't listen to God's call. This is where the story says he was swallowed by a great fish and vomited on shore 3 days later. Our story today picks up after that scene. God is giving Jonah a second chance to go to Ninevah, which he finally does. God is calling Jonah to call the people home again. He does and to his surprise they listen to him.

One of the messages of this first reading is that following God's call, doing what Jesus would have us do does not necessarily mean it's where we want to go, but we're called to do so all the same. Our mission is clear to repent....to come home call others home who have wandered away....to call people from exile of alienation, rejection, not belonging into a place where they are home again...back in relationship with God and one another. Amen.