

Preaching Repentance in Lent

An Invitation to the Observance of the Lenten Discipline

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Friends in Christ, every year at this time, we celebrate our redemption through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lent is a time to prepare for this celebration and to renew our life in the paschal mystery. We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes. This ancient sign speaks of the frailty and uncertainty of human life and marks the penitence of the community. I invite you, therefore, in the name of Jesus Christ, to observe a Holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by reading and meditating on the word of God.¹

During an Ash Wednesday service, this liturgy marks for me and the congregations I have served the beginning of the Season of Lent. My practice was to repeat the “Invitation” on the First Sunday of Lent because the attendance on Ash Wednesday was often sparse. (As one parishioner told me, she was “not into the ashes thing.”)

Herein lies the challenge of preaching repentance in Lent. We live in a culture in which most of us and our parishioners are “not into the ashes thing!” Our culture encourages us to have a positive self-image and not to dwell on the negative about ourselves and what is going on around us. Therefore, even when we give a verbal commitment to seek to observe a “holy Lent,” it flies in the face of a culture in denial of our need for repentance.

In response to the invitation to repent during the season of Lent, I think most of us will take a pass. It sounds like an invitation to have a root canal. Even if absolutely necessary, it’s not something you embrace. Let me be honest. I have a difficult time acknowledging my own need for repentance, must less preaching to others about their need to repent. Carlisle Harvard, my wife of 54 years, describes me as someone who is “often wrong but seldom in doubt.” Does that sound like someone who can easily acknowledge the need for repentance? So the challenge to preach repentance is out of step personally and culturally for me and for many of you.

So why consider engaging in a practice which puts us in conflict with ourselves and our culture? Lent is the season when we as followers of Jesus Christ are called upon to do some uncomfortable things like take a hard look at our personal lives and our common life in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in preparation to celebrate the incredible reality of Resurrection. God’s love endures all things, even death, and nothing can separate us from God’s love. How do you get ready to celebrate the power of God’s love to set things right in a broken world?

The good news of the Gospel begins with the cry of John the Baptist in the wilderness: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2). John the Baptist is like the unwelcomed guest who always shows up at the worst time to throw a wet blanket on our preparation for a Merry Christmas. Every Advent we have

to listen to him call us “a brood of vipers.” Who would include this character on your guest list for your holiday party?

John is not alone in this call to repent. After his baptism by John in the Jordan River, Jesus begins his ministry with the same message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17). If we heed this call to repentance during Lent, what are we asking our congregations and ourselves to do? I like the way Lamar Williamson describes it in his commentary on Mark: “What is the meaning of repentance? The Greek word means ‘to change one’s mind.’ Behind it lies the Hebrew verb ‘to turn around,’ that is to change one’s heart, will, and conduct.”²

To repent in the biblical sense is something much bigger than acknowledging all the bad things you have done and your feeling guilty about all of your past misdeeds. As Tom Long suggests in his commentary on Matthew, “Repentance is a basic reorientation of one’s life. In repentance, one turns from one framework of meaning to another, from one way of thinking about self, others, God, and life to another competing and compelling vision.”³

It reminds me of the story Will Willimon tells about an incident when he was Dean of the Duke Chapel. A young freshman visited the chapel during orientation. He had been raised in the church and had a strong church background. He seemed like a great candidate to be an active participant in the life and ministry of Duke Chapel. Will did not see him again until in his junior year when they met crossing the campus. “I have missed you at the chapel,” Will told him. The student responded, “I have not been there because I know what you are all about. You want to change me, to get me involved in ways to help others. I am content with my life on campus with studies and my fraternity. This is a comfortable and enjoyable life as it is!” Will told the student that his was the best reason not to be involved in the church he had heard. Will suggested that they put a big sign in the front of the Duke Chapel saying, “Caution: Do Not Enter Here If You Do Not Want To Be Changed!”

Preaching repentance is risky business because it is an invitation to have your life changed. It is important to be aware of the way this call to repentance comes to us. The way that Jesus issues the call in Mark’s Gospel is crucial: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15).

Preaching repentance is not about a human endeavor like pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. *Repentance is a gift from God* made possible by God’s intervention into our lives to transform our world. We are only able to repent because of the prior action of God “coming near to us in Jesus Christ.” Without God’s intervention, we would be stuck in our own best intentions without hope that things would ever change or that we could change.

Back in the day, we were taught in seminary that with God, the indicative precedes the imperative. The call for us to repent is possible only because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This is the heart of repentance. We are called to look at the world in a different way because of what God has done, is doing, and promises to do in our lives and our world.

Do you get it? The good news of preaching repentance in Lent is that we can be transformed because of the transformative presence and power of God made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without this orientation to life in the light of God’s presence in our world, we would be stuck.

God's people have always needed to be reminded of this reality which shapes our reality, particularly in difficult times. At one point in our ancestors' journey of faith, they had been taken by the Babylonians in exile for over fifty years. They were living in a culture that seemed to deny all that they held sacred. Then the Prophet Isaiah reminded them of who and whose they were with these words: "Why do you say, 'My way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God'? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (Isaiah 40:27-29).

So the first question to be raised in preaching penitence in Lent is this: Are you able to be transformed by the radical counter-narrative to conventional wisdom that life is a tale told by an idiot who has no belief in God's truth and justice? These are tough times when the values we hold dear, like compassion and hospitality, are under attack. It is tempting to be afraid that the center will not hold.

Can you believe that underneath the harsh realities of multiple natural disasters, leadership whose behavior repudiates the core values of our faith, and personal lives that seem so vulnerable, in such a time as this, we are able to hear and believe the counter-narrative that God is at work in this world building the Beloved Community where there is a place and a future for all God's children. How do we know this? Because in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, something happened that was and is a game changer. When you come to the awareness of this reality, that God's love has been let loose in the world, things are not the same. It leads to a change of heart and to a new way of living in the world. Because the forces that seek to counter this reality are so strong, it needs to be retold in liturgy and sermon: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). If you can believe this incredible Good News which is the essence of the gospel, then you are on your way to repentance, to being transformed by the Good News that God who claimed us in the waters of baptism has not given up on us and the world Christ came to redeem.

Occasionally, people and events come into our lives showing us what it means that the presence of God is near so that we are empowered to repent and believe the good news. This happened for me during Lent last year during a Community Lenten Service at the First Baptist Church in downtown Charleston. At the time, I was the transitional pastor at First Scots Presbyterian Church. Because of the events in our neighborhood that took place at Mother Emanuel AME Church on June 17, 2015, and the responses, we had a series on Grace and the Power of Forgiveness. The speaker on that Wednesday at noon was the Reverend Anthony Thompson, whose wife, the Reverend Myra Thompson, had been leading the Bible study and was killed. I encourage you to read the remarkable sermon by the Reverend Anthony Thompson in this edition of *Journal for Preachers*. Hearing him deliver that message in Charleston was a transformative moment for me and the congregation gathered there.

The next Wednesday, we were meeting at another neighborhood church, St. John's Lutheran, and the speaker was to be the newly installed mayor of Charleston, John Tecklenburg. John is a devout Roman Catholic and also a good friend. I thought John had a difficult assignment following Reverend Thompson. We gathered outside the church at noon, ready for the procession. No Mayor Tecklenburg! I called him on

his cell phone—no answer! The procession began, and then the host pastor began the service. During the first hymn, Mayor Tecklenburg slipped into the pew beside me. He was out of breath, but he had his Bible in hand. He whispered that he had been held up in traffic. He began his remarks to the group by expressing his profound grief with Reverend Thompson for the loss of the nine lives murdered by white racist Dylann Roof. He expressed deep gratitude for the response to this horrific act and for the message we had heard the previous week. The genuineness and emotion of his words were moving. Mayor Tecklenburg then recounted his own history of being raised in a segregated Orangeburg, South Carolina, where he and his family had worked against discrimination and injustice. The environment was permeated with racism, and change was slow and difficult. After the experience of the massacre at Mother Emanuel, the response of victims' families demonstrated the power of God at work in them to bring healing. It reinforced for him that love and forgiveness are more powerful than hate and violence. It was his conviction that it was time for us as individuals and as a city to repent of racism that has haunted us in the past and still surrounds us. It was a powerful statement.

At this point, he opened his Bible and said that to simply say we repent of racism is a good start but is not enough. He turned to the Book of Acts and read these words from the Apostle Paul giving his testimony before King Agrippa about his message to the people “that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance” (Acts 26:20).

The Mayor was then bold enough to suggest some “deeds of repentance” for our racism:

1. Ensuring that all children in Charleston, especially the most vulnerable have adequate schools and receive good educational opportunities.
2. Ensuring that affordable, safe housing is available for those with the greatest need.
3. Ensuring that law enforcement and the criminal justice systems provide safety and justice for African Americans and Latinos.

The Mayor said this was a good place to start with what John the Baptist called “deeds worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:8). In his message, Mayor Tecklenburg made us aware that the preaching of repentance involves change which can be painful and risky. But it leads to a new way of looking at God, ourselves, our neighbors, and the world, and enables us to be transformed and live with hope and courage.

Will you accept the invitation to observe a Holy Lent by preaching repentance? It is an invitation to invite others to join you into following the One who is always transforming our lives and giving us new hope, the One who is inviting us to be agents of God's steadfast love and reconciling presence in these divisive times. It is the invitation of the One who said, “The Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news.”

Notes

1 *Book of Common Worship*, 2223.

2 Lamar Williamson, *Mark: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1983), 31.

3 Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 27.