

The Bridge of Repentance

(Matthew 3: 1)

Usually when I preach I try to unpack a passage of scripture verse by verse. But today I want us to spend our time thinking about the first verse of the Gospel reading

Matthew begins the third chapter of his account of the Gospel with this sentence: “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,² ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’”

I want to highlight for you two phrases in this verse. “In those days” and “the kingdom of heaven has come near”. By beginning with a reference to “those days” Matthew is talking about the kind of time we know as chronological time.

The passing of one second into the next as the clock marks

- 3600 seconds an hour
- 86400 seconds a day
- 604 800 seconds a week

and

- 31 449,600 seconds a year

Many people live out their lives having as their only time reference “those days”. The days of chronological time as marked by the tick, tick, ticking of the clock. But as I touched on last Sunday, Christians recognize that while we too live in the days of chronological time, we are also aware of another time. A time marked in this passage by the phrase “the kingdom of heaven has come near”.

This is not chronological time. Kingdom of God time is what is called Kairos Time. It is God’s time.

As Christians we celebrate the Seasons of Advent and Christmas so that we can focus on two Kairos moments. Advent looks forward to the future Kairos moment, or God time when Jesus will come again. The New Testament is filled with images which look to that day. When Jesus comes again his coming will be sudden. We don't know when on the calendar this day will be. But when this day does come chronological time will come to an end and the only time that will matter is Kairos or "God time." St John gives us a vivid image of this future kairos time when in the 21st chapter the Revelation he writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'

So Advent is a season when we are invited to look forward to this future kairos time.

Christmas is that season when we look back to that Kairos time two thousand years ago when God visited this planet in the person of Jesus Christ. This kairos moment is brought into focus for us words Matthew writes for us in the opening chapter of his account of the Gospel story. Joseph is told by God in a dream

'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'

If Advent looks forward to what God will do and Christmas looks backward to what God has done we then need to ask the question Why is it important that we look both forward and backwards? It is important to do this because it then allows us to think about our present in a new way. When we are aware of this future kairos time and

remember the kairos time of Jesus' earthly life this will influence how we live in the present. We know that how we spend the

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are to be influenced by the kingdom of God.

Within this verse there is a word that bridges the phrase "In those day" and the "Kingdom of heaven has come near" It is the word "Repent"

Repentance prepares the ground for God's kairos time to break into our lives in the present This allows for us to love out the hours marked by the clock are shaped by God's presence influencing our lives.

When John says at the end of this morning's passage that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit he means that He imparts to us the divine power that allows us to under his rule. Repentance creates the space in our lives that conditions us for the Baptism in the Holy Spirit

But what is repentance?

In his article "Returning to Church," novelist Dan Wakefield movingly described his own repentance, a turn from despair to faith. Wakefield portrayed a treacherous time in his life. A long-standing relationship with a woman had just dissolved. He was out of money, and had just buried, within the span of seven months, both of his parents. His work no longer satisfied him, and drugs had become an all too attractive means of escape. "I was," he wrote, "headed for the edge of a cliff." A chance conversation in a neighborhood bar with a house painter, who was looking for a place to go to mass on Christmas Eve, led to Wakefield's own attendance at a Christmas candlelight

service, then to participation in other services of worship and Bible studies, and to a gradually developing devotional life.

As Wakefield's religious involvement increased, he experienced a growing freedom from his sense of drifting purposelessness and from what he called "my assortment of life-numbing addictions." He wrote:

...

at some point or other they felt as if they were "lifted," taken away ... The only concept I know to describe such experience is that of "grace," and the accompanying adjective "amazing" comes to mind along with it

Christians are familiar with this, the deepest form of a certain kind of repentance, and indeed we celebrate it. "Once I was blind, but now I see," we sing. Christians rejoice in the kind of repentance which buries the rags of a soiled past in favor of the white garments of a new future. But even though this comes closer to John's message, this is not yet fully the kind of repentance which John proclaimed.

- The repentance John preached is not a mid-course correction; it is more radical than that.
- The repentance John preached is not repudiation of the past; it is more complex than that.
- The repentance John preached calls for a revising of the past.
- It calls for us to look behind before we dare to move ahead.
- It calls for us to encounter the past we have lived through but have not fully experienced, the past we have inherited but not inhabited, before we enter a future we do not yet comprehend.

What does this mean? Consider the experience of a business executive on the verge of implementing a shrewd business plan. The scheme involved temporarily dropping prices below the level of profitability in order to starve a smaller competitor out of the market. Then, with the market to himself, prices and profits could rise. The fact that the competitor was a struggling family-owned business, not really a major factor in the market, but the sole livelihood of a family with three small children, was known

to the executive. The plan was technically legal, though, and all competitors are fair game, since business, after all, is business.

Just as the arrangements were nearly in place, the executive was called back to his hometown for the funeral of a cousin. During the graveside service, as the man sat under the funeral tent which was stretched over the family plot, his eye fell on the gravestone of his grandmother, who had died when he was only a boy. Inscribed on her stone were words from the Book of Proverbs: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue."

"The teaching of kindness ..." The words seemed to be written in fire as they burned in his heart. He had read them many times before on nostalgic visits to the cemetery, but now they leapt from the past into his life. He did not merely recall his grandmother; he was confronted by her memory, judged by the commitments he vaguely knew she held, but had not considered to have any claim on his life. It was a strange and disturbing experience, and he returned to his city with no will to destroy, but to seek somehow to know and live "the teaching of kindness."

Here was a man who in that cemetery had a kairos moment that would begin to shape how he spent his chronological time. This is what repentance does in our lives

The essayist and short story writer Eudora Welty wrote in **One Writer's Beginning** about the deep insight which can result when people explore memories of experiences they thought they already fully understood. "Connections slowly emerge ... cause and effect begin to align themselves ... And suddenly a light is thrown back, as when your train rounds a curve, showing there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you've come, is rising there still"

A mountain of meaning rises behind you ... rising there still. That is the soil of the repentance John preached.

- What does this repentance look like in our lives?

Whenever we return to an old and well-worn passage in the Bible and do not, through nostalgia or willfulness, force it to say only what we expect it to say, but allow it to

encounter us anew, creating new and demanding possibilities for our lives, we have repented.

- When we invoke some experience in our memory and discover, in our remembering, more evidence of the hand of God there than we first saw, more signs of the grace of God than we ever knew were there before, more call for gratitude to God than we have yet expressed, and we find in ourselves a will to live a different, more faithful and obedient tomorrow because of what we have discerned, we have repented.

- Whenever we return to the faith we have been given, to the gospel we have heard so often, to the stories which have been told again and again, and find there not a retreat, but a renewal. Whenever we discover that all that God has done in our common yesterdays is pointing us anew to the Christ who comes this day, to forgive our sins and to make possible a tomorrow of faith and joy, we have repented.

It is this kind of repentance that not only allows us to look backwards to Christ's first coming with gratitude and forward to his second coming with hope. This kind of repentance allows us to claim that in the present we can know that God's time is at work in our days so that with the Apostle Paul we can say:

⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope . . . May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.