

Matthew 4:12-22

Repentance is the way to the light

This morning we are going to talk about something a lot of people often get confused. This morning we are going to talk about repentance, but I need all y'all's help. Is there a difference between forgiveness and repentance? (pause) Okay. Let's try it this way. If you think repentance and forgiveness are the same thing raise your hand. (pause) If you think forgiveness and repentance are different things raise your hand. (pause) Forgiveness and repentance are two very different things. Forgiveness is about letting go of something so you can move forward. For instance, this past week, my son Brock was laying down in this little Elmo tent. It was kinda hilarious because when he laid down inside the tent his legs stuck out from the knees down. Karen and I were in the kitchen trying to scarf down a little lunch when we heard this commotion from the living room. Gabrielle, our 9 month old baby, was on top of Brock hitting him in the face. She didn't know what she was doing and thankfully Brock did not hit her back, but everybody knew Brock was NOT happy. Not ten minutes later Brock was sitting on his Elmo couch and Gabrielle was sitting next to him. They had made up. Brock had forgiven his baby sister. When Gabrielle hit Brock it was like Gabrielle was robbing their relationship bank. Gabrielle owed Brock a debt. When Brock forgave Gabrielle the debt was forgiven. Brock let it go so they both could move forward. That is forgiveness. Repentance is something different.

To repent is to turn around and do something else. Gabrielle stopped hitting Brock and chose to cuddle with him instead. That is repentance. This morning's passage is about repentance, and the light repentance can bring to the dark places in our lives, in our community, and in the world.

Some 40 days before this morning's passage Jesus was baptized by his cousin John the Baptizer in the Jordan River. Jesus had then been driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days. During that time the devil himself tempted Jesus three times. Jesus made the choice three times to choose to put God first and finally told the devil, **"'Begone, Satan!' For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'"** (Matt 4:10).

When Jesus comes out of the wilderness he learns of his cousin John the Baptizer's arrest. Then Jesus goes to Galilee, to the lands given to Zebulun and Naphtali. There in those lands the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled.

"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-  
The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned"

Isaiah 9:1-2, Matthew 4:15-16

So here's the deal. The people of the land of Zebulun and Naphtali had long ago disobeyed the Lord. They broke God's commandment. They refused to return to God. They refused to repent. As a people God allowed them to bring the disdain and disrespect of their neighbors and enemies upon themselves. Brothers and sisters, what happens when our enemies do not respect us? (pause) Too often when our enemies do not respect us they look for ways to take advantage or to do us harm. Zebulun and Naphtali controlled the region on the northern end of the Promised land. In Jesus time this land was called Galilee of the Gentiles. They were some of the first conquered when the Assyrians destroyed Israel. For Zebulun and Naphtali darkness and the shadow of death were not just figurative, literary devices or poetic expressions. They had lived it. Now, many hundred years later, at the time of Jesus, the Gentiles of that land are still bearing the stain of Zebulun and Naphtali's mistakes.

Sinful, rebellious, disobedience put the region into that situation. There was a kind of darkness in that region. It was the darkness of understanding. They did not know who they really were, or to whom they really belonged. They did still live in fear, but it was not a fear of the Assyrians. The Jews were a conquered people at the time of Jesus. The Romans controlled the region. They were not free to govern themselves. The Romans could pretty much treat them however they wanted. Many were mistreated or bullied. To the people living in fear and darkness Isaiah delivered God's message, they would see a great light. Jesus Christ fulfilled that prophecy. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy with the light of repentance.

Rebellious disobedience lead the people into the darkness of worry under the shadow of fear and death in the face of their enemies. Repentance would lead them back into the light of God's loving grace. For from that time Jesus preached, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17). Repentance is possible and life giving for a people collectively – together. A group can repent. That mob mindset that can lead groups to do terrible things can also lead a group of people to turn back to God. However, repentance is not just a group effort.

Zebulun and Naphtali are a part of Galilee of the Gentiles. There Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee and saw Simon-Peter and his brother Andrew throwing their nets into the water for a catch of fish. Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19). Immediately Peter and Andrew leave their nets and follow Jesus. Peter and Andrew bring along James and John. They left behind what they had been doing all of their lives. They left behind what they knew. Why? Because Jesus asked them to make a change. They were still themselves. They were still fishermen. Jesus was giving them the opportunity to bring in a different catch. Sometimes to repent means to follow Jesus away from what is comfortable and instead off into a new direction.

My sisters and brothers repentance is about an about-face made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. In this morning's passage it was Jesus who called the people to repent. Today it is the Holy Spirit through God's prevenient grace which calls us to come to the cross of Jesus Christ and to accept God's power to turn back to God and change our lives. True repentance is no half-hearted effort. The Apostle Paul clearly states salvation cannot be won by works of the flesh, lest any man should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). And yet faith without works is a dead and devilish faith.<sup>1</sup> Faithful repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit leading to an honest and devoted love for the Lord our God with all of our heart, with all of our mind, with all of our soul and with all of our strength (Deut 6:5).<sup>2</sup> Holy Spirit repentance brings light into the world because we stop chasing our selfish desires; we stop hunkering down in the way we have always done it, and we stop waiting for the world to go back to what we liked. Jesus turned the world upside down. Jesus is still changing the world into something new. When we choose to respond to the Holy Spirit we choose to leave our fishing nets behind. We leave behind what is comfortable. We leave behind the way we have always done it. We are still the body of Christ; it's just that now as a family we listen for what God is doing today instead of settling for what we have been told, what we want, and what the world dictates is right. If we want the world to change then we as a body of believers need to pray, search Scriptures for ourselves, and look to the Lord for guidance. My sisters and brothers today is a good day to repent. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley, John, "The Almost Christian," John Wesley's Sermons, an Anthology. Edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater. (Nashville: Abindon 1991) 66.

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