

Repent

Psalm 27, Matthew 4:12-17

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"Come, my heart says, seek God's face." The Psalmist's heart may have said that, but mine more often says, "Run away, run away!!" I do not want to have God staring straight into my face. I'm one of those people who could never look my mother in the face when I knew I had done something wrong. I couldn't bear the disappointment I would see there. And I was never very good at hiding what I had done.

So, knowing that I fall short as often as I stand up to God's hopes for me, I am not eager to seek God's face. In fact, I sat here on Monday, as reader after reader took the words of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* and made them live again, and my head dropped lower and lower. I was hearing words like this: "There was a time when the church was very powerful. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded...popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society....They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated. Things are different now. The contemporary church...is so often the arch supporter of the status quo." And "I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis...would be some of our strongest allies...all too many have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained glass windows." And this was written in 1963.

Yes, I could pass on standing face to face with God, knowing that while much has changed since 1963, too much has not. And that whatever I have done has been too little and what I have left undone has been gargantuan.

And that's just my own personal business about race and privilege, let alone all the other "dones" and "undones" of which I am guilty.

No, I do not want to seek out God's face just now.

I'm not sure how each of you feels about that. Is there unfinished stuff in your life, the "dones" and "undones" you may have on any given issue or with any given relationship in your life?

Well. Did you hear the first words to come out of the mouth of Jesus in Matthew's telling of this story? The first word, actually, is "repent." "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near," is at hand, is in your midst, is right outside your door, is waiting for you. Repent.

One of those "churchy" words no one uses anywhere else. It means "turn around." I think of it as meaning step outside your body for a minute and walk all around your life and see things with fresh eyes. Not just the new wrinkles around your eyes or a new pimple poking out or a couple of extra pounds picked up over the holidays. I mean walk all around **your life**. When I do that, sometimes I speak these words of the Psalmist, "Do not turn your servant away in anger, O God. Do not abandon me!"

Repent, Jesus said. Get your life in order **because** God is doing something absolutely amazing right now, right where we are, and, Jesus says, I am going to need you to be free of anything that drags you down, any fear or hurt or anger or greed or revenge you are holding onto that is holding you back, any unfinished business you have with someone else that is dragging you down, anything intimidating you into being less than your full self, any ideas that are getting in the way of me being active in your head and your heart, says Jesus.

Before we can respond fully to the call of God, whether in our lives outside the church or in our work in the church, whether in our family or civic life, and especially in our imagining and laying the foundations for something new, as Jesus was doing, as we are doing here, we need to spend some time getting our spirits in shape. Because that will make a difference in how we approach this work here, and all our work as followers of Jesus out there. We have to get in spiritual shape for the work at hand.

Repentance is hard work, because it begins with that holographic 3 D image of our lives that we examine as carefully as a radiologist reads a scan. We need to look full on and honestly at the good, the bad and the ugly. We need to do it because the tasks ahead require us to lighten our loads, get in the right mind, allow ourselves to soften so that God can mold us. Let go. We need to be honest with ourselves, other people, and God. We each need to do it alone; no one can do it for us.

Which would be too hard, I think, except that we don't actually do it alone. We do this work in the context of the kind of love most of us can only imagine. "If my own family abandons me," the Psalmist sings with confidence, "God will pick me up." Before Matthew reports about Jesus calling us to repentance, he reminds us of the prophecy of Isaiah long before, "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." This light is not just the harsh light of those movie spy thrillers where someone being interrogated has to confess what they have done. Though there is that part of it. It is the light that called the Magi to find a child. It is the light that burst from a shattered tomb on Easter morning. It is the light that shines in the darkness and cannot be overcome.

"Repent" means that we carry to God all that needs to come to light; that we come fully into the light of Christ. Where we are held to account, loved, forgiven, filled, and re-empowered to go with Jesus wherever we need to go; wherever God needs us to go, unafraid, and unbound.

The Kingdom of Heaven, my friends, is not a place. It is a reality that can exist any place. The reality of God's rule, where extravagant, bodacious, foolish love is the law. We can't live or work or worship in that realm without getting rid of anything in us that would deny that law. (repeat) Jesus' disciples learned that the hard way over and over again, so we are in good company.

A few minutes ago we sang a prayer that, if we took it seriously, would lead us into the kind of repentance Jesus talked about. An inner housecleaning that can ready us to walk and work with God and keep that kingdom near. The language of the song is archaic, and sometimes that can get in the way of understanding. For example, we use "thou" for God, which is actually kind of cool to do now and then, because it reminds us that God is a "you," but more than "you." It is easier to put aside what needs to be put aside in our lives if we have something substantial with which to fill those spaces. God. Thou.

Here's what I would like to do. I'd like us to say this prayer together. We're going to say the first verse together aloud. Then invite you to say the next three verses quietly in your seat or silently, slowly, feeling them, living into them, letting them work you over. Let us pray....

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me save that thou art;
Thou my best thought by day or by night
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.
Be thou my wisdom and thou my true word
I ever with thee and thou with me Lord
Thou and thou only first in my heart;
Great God of heaven my treasure thou art.
Riches I heed not nor life's empty praise
Thou mine inheritance now and always
Thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tower,
Rise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.
Great God of heaven, when victory is won,

Grant heaven's joys to me O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart whatever befall
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.