

Year A, January 22, 2017
3 Epiphany
Christ Church, Mexia

"Two hunters flew deep into the backwoods of Canada to hunt elk. They bagged six elk. The pilot told them that the plane could only carry four elk out. 'But the plane that carried us out last year was exactly like this one,' the hunters protested. 'The horsepower was the same, the weather was similar, and we had six elk then.' Hearing this the pilot reluctantly agreed to try. They loaded up and took off, but sure enough, there was insufficient power to climb out of the valley with all that weight, and they crashed. As they stumbled from the wreckage, one hunter asked the other if he knew where they were. 'Well, I'm not sure, replied the second, 'but I think we are about two miles from where we crashed last year'" (Hodgin, 350). Believe it or not, this story has meaning for us today.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." So, what do you think of when you hear the word repent? Most of us probably think it is about admitting and being sorry for the bad things we have done – our sin. Well, let me share some words by N.T. Wright on this subject and this passage: "The trouble with that word, (repent), is that people have not understood it. They have thought it means 'feeling bad about yourself.' It doesn't. It means 'change direction;' 'turn (around) and go the other way;' or 'stop what you are doing and do the opposite instead.'" Now do you begin to see how the opening story relates?

And Dr. Wright is not the only one who believes this about the word repent or repentance. Richard Trench, Archbishop of Dublin in the late 1800s, defined it this way: "Repentance: That mighty change in mind, heart, and life, wrought by the Spirit of God." And A.W. Tozer, an evangelical Christian preacher of the last century, put it this way: "A thousand years of remorse over a wrong act would not please God as much as a change of conduct and a reformed life."

Let me illustrate with one more story: "Jimmy had trouble pronouncing the letter "R" so his teacher gave him a sentence to practice at home: 'Robert gave Richard a rap in the rib for roasting the rabbit so rare.' Some days later the teacher asked him to say the sentence for her. Jimmy rattled it off like this: 'Bob gave Dick a poke in the side for not cooking the bunny enough.'" He avoided the letter "R" altogether. When we feel like we have repented because we are sorry and feel

bad, but keep doing the same thing like the hunters, we have not truly repented.

The problem may be linguistic in part. The Latin derivation of the word repentance leads us to believe the way we tend to think of the word. However, the Greek word for 'repent' that was used in the ancient writings was "*metanoia*." *Metanoia* comes from the two roots "meta," generally meaning "after" or "change," while "nous" means "mind." So, when "*metanoia*" is used in the New Testament, it generally should be interpreted more like: to change your mind and get it in the right place. And this declaration is really the starting point for all of Jesus' teaching. "From that time, Jesus began to proclaim, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

So, remember "(r)epentance is not like the person who sent the IRS a check for \$150 with the remark, 'If I can't sleep, I'll send you the rest.'" (Charles Swindoll). When we are called by God, as Jesus called his disciples, we are supposed to change our minds and our lives and get them in the right place! We are not just supposed to give "lip service," if you will.

But what does that mean exactly? How do we "turn" to God in mind and action? To answer those questions, let me return to some words from Tom Wright: "Jesus believed that his contemporaries were going in the wrong direction. They were bent on revolution of the standard kind: military resistance to occupying forces, leading to a takeover of power. Part of the underlying theme of his temptations in the wilderness was the suggestion that he should use his own status, as God's *Messiah*, to launch some kind of movement that would sweep him to power, privilege and glory.

The problem with all these movements was that they were fighting darkness with darkness, and Israel was called – and Jesus was called – to bring God's *light* into the world. That's why Matthew (connects) Jesus' early preaching with the prophecy of Isaiah that spoke about people in the dark being dazzled by sudden light, a prophecy which went on to speak about the child to be born, the coming Messiah, through whom God would truly liberate Israel at last (Isaiah 9:1-7) ...

His message of repentance was not, therefore, that they should feel sorry for personal and private sins (though he would of course want that as well), but that as a nation they should stop rushing towards the cliff of violent revolution, and instead go the other way, towards

God's kingdom of light and peace and healing and forgiveness, for themselves and for the world." (Wright, Matthew for Everyone)

That is what it means for us. If we don't change our minds and our hearts to do the will of God, we will actually be standing in the way of the kingdom of God. If we continue to call for and invoke the ways of darkness, we will live in darkness, and we will have no light to share with the world – a world that so desperately needs light, especially those at the bottom, or at the margins, of the economic and social systems – or those just dealing with some of the tragedies of life.

In the name of the One God - the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.