

“The Power of Repentance”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Isaiah 55:1-13
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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I want to begin with a quote from Father Timothy Joyce: “Christ is not here to illuminate the deformity of a fallen world but rather to release a beautiful and holy world from bondage; most of all to release the human person from bondage and dissipate the shadows that lie across all creation.”

I think sometimes repentance gets a bad rap—as if Christ came to point out all our flaws, make us feel dirty and damned, and cover us in shame. There certainly are some religious communities who operate in shame. They scare you into obedience with threats of hell; they heap on the guilt whenever you stray. Though if you pay attention, guilt is usually reserved for the lowly, wayward flock with little to no accountability for the domineering leadership.

If these are the sorts of images the word “repentance” conjures up for you, run away, my friend! Such fear-based, control-obsessed religiosity is not of God and will not get you any closer to the Holy. Shame moves you away from God. Like Adam and Eve attempting to cover themselves with fig leaves, shame is the direct opposite of naked, truth-telling, free-in-Christ glorious repentance. To steal a line from one of my former sermons, “Repentance isn’t penance; it’s a party.”

Now I know we don’t usually talk about the season of Lent in party-like terms. We are, after all, headed to the cross, and I do not mean to suggest that the practice of repentance is easy. It is not. To own up to what you have done—your mistakes, your failures, your blind spots, your addictions, your dishonesty, your prejudices, your grudges—that does not happen easy peasy. But repentance is also not about shame, not about wallowing, not about despair. Repentance is about opening the cage door at last, removing the prison doors, cutting off the chains. It takes *work* to get there; but the arrival is oh so worth it.

In Isaiah chapter 55, the prophet is writing to people who have been in exile. They’ve been away from home for a long time—captives in a foreign land—so we are not talking about people who have had it easy. These are people who have had it tough. They will be returning home after a long time away from their true selves, and the prophet begins gently, softly, excitedly with an invitation: “All of you who are thirsty, come to the water! Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat! Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!”

The prophet also mentions King David, even though we know David was not exactly an exemplary king, but I think the prophet mentions him here not as a person but as a symbol of homecoming. They’ve lived so long under the oppressive reign of foreign kings. David’s name is familiar. David’s name reminds the of God’s anointing. David’s name says to the people, “You are home.”

But then the prophet's welcoming words take a turn: "Seek the LORD when he can still be found; call him while he is yet near. Let the wicked abandon their ways and the sinful their schemes." Suddenly the dream of coming home and being welcomed warmly is interrupted by harsh, exacting words.

Ouch. We just got home, man! Give us a break. We still have our hiking boots on and road dust on our skin. Don't call us wicked as soon as we walk in the door!

But remember, this prophet isn't dealing in shame. He is offering the keys to freedom. So he wants to be clear: the people cannot simply return to life as it was and expect all to be well. No, they must equate return with real and lasting change.

Discovering the deeper truth about yourself is, I think, a little like exile. Usually you dwell in some uncomfortable space for a while as more and more is brought to light. But the exile itself isn't repentance. It is merely the revealing. What you choose to do with the revelation is the thing. Some people will jump at the first chance to return to life as usual. To them, anything is better than exile. Anything is better than facing the truth.

But it is the prophet's job to disrupt a simple return. The prophet is not merely interested in the return home. The prophet is all about the return to God. "Seek the LORD when he can still be found; call him while he is yet near. Let the wicked abandon their ways and the sinful their schemes." Before they simply return to business as usual, he urges them not to let this exile go to waste. The time away was the chance for clarity and with clarity comes the chance for repentance.

A prophet can never force people to change, of course. All the prophet can do is disrupt a return to the norm, and so he does. But the disruption is not without promise. "Let them return to God so that God may have mercy on them. God is generous with forgiveness (CEB)."

Are you thirsty for forgiveness? Come to the water!

In vv. 12-13 the promise continues: "For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

Did you know that Isaiah chapter 55 is only 13 verses long, but the lectionary leaves out vv. 12-13, ending today's selected reading at v.11? If I had to make a guess as to why, I think it might be because this business of singing mountains and clapping trees is just a bit too Easter-y. A little too happy for Lent, you know?

But did you also know that in the 40 days before Easter—the season we call Lent—the Sundays don't count? Lent is the 40 days before Easter, not including the Sundays. Sundays are when you are supposed to break your Lenten fast and indulge in a little resurrection hope. So I say: read

vv.12-13 loudly and boldly! It is Sunday after all. “The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song; and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands!”

For some of us who grew up with Shame as the fourth person of the Trinity, we need to hear the good that is in store if we are ever going to reclaim the practice of repentance as the liberating, life-giving act that it is.

Now, before the prophet describes the very creation erupting in joy, he says this in v.8-9: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” I think this is the death part of the story. To get to the freedom, the singing, the dancing, first some things have to die—like your arrogance before God, your certitude, your pride. There is nothing wrong with a healthy self-esteem or a grounded-in-love confidence. That’s not the kind of pride we are talking about here. We are talking about the pride that has mistaken its own way as God’s way or that accepts the status quo as the way God wants it. The prophet’s words here are an invitation to the people (as we have been saying each week) to step down from the moral high ground on which they presume to walk and open themselves to the Mystery of a God who is beyond their understanding.

Like most things we’ve been talking about around here lately, it is important to note that you cannot properly understand pride and humility without understanding the dynamics of power. This is why, in our weekly prayer of confession, it is not just a generic prayer of confession. It is not a prayer for the already humiliated to have more humility or for the powerless to give up what little power they have. Instead, we purposefully and prayerfully name the ways we are privileged, the ways in which we may be situated in power over others.

Did you know the Bible makes multiple references to *God* repenting? I’m serious! For example, several times God repents or relents from sending calamity. Repent doesn’t mean sackcloth and ashes. In God’s case, it’s not about sin. Repent means change and in the Bible, God changes God’s mind. I think this is a big deal.

It leads me to wonder if perhaps the greatest repentance of all is Christ himself—God in flesh on a cross—who, as it says in Philippians, “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself . . .” What bigger change could anyone possibly make? God gave up being God! I dare you to make a life change bigger than that.

It’s not that Christ ceased to be God, of course. It is that Christ relinquished the power that came with being God. He had to relinquish some power in order to become human, and he had to relinquish power in order to die. The mind-boggling thing about it all is that this relinquishment of power on the cross is what led to the resurrection and the very transformation of the world. Repentance is powerful, y’all! This is the Gospel! Thanks be to God.

If you truly want to follow Jesus all the way to the cross and all the way through to life on the other side, you’ve got to give power away. You’ve got to repent of power. You’ve got to step down from power. I’m not talking about the oppressed accepting their powerless lot in life. I’m

talking about those of us with power opting to share it, opting to acknowledge what we have and like Jesus, not grasping at it, but letting it go.

Confession: I'm trying to teach my babies about sharing, but it's not really working. Baby L has started to hold out her toys to Baby B. She smiles broadly too, as if she truly means to share. But as soon as Baby B reaches out to take the toy, Baby L furrows her brow and takes it back. There is this grasping that keeps her from releasing. And watching her I realize I'm rather infantile too in my attempts to be like the Christ, who gave his power away.

I'm thinking of that line Jesus says about whoever wants to keep his life must lose it, and how perhaps that applies to power. Whoever wants to experience power must lose power. That was certainly Christ's experience on the cross. By giving away, he gained the world.

Hear again these words of the prophet, not as shameful but as invitational: "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their ways, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon . . . Then you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands!" Repentance is powerful, y'all, and forgiveness is flowing, so don't be afraid. Come to the waters and drink. Amen.