

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Third Sunday in Epiphany - Year B

Readings - Jonah 3:1-5,10; Psalm 62:6-14; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

ACNA Readings - Jeremiah 3:19-4:4; Psalm 130; 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Introduction: Epiphany is not only a season in the Church calendar in celebration of the manifestation of Messiah to shepherds and kings. The word epiphany can also be used to describe the experience of sudden insight or inspired discovery, such as a scientific breakthrough! Coupled with the newfound enlightenment are often emotions of wonder, delight, and elation. The realization of the reality of the Living God in a new believer often brings feelings of joy, rapture, happiness, but also repentance.

Common Theme: The call to repentance is just as relevant and vital to the world today as it was at the Epiphany of the Messiah. Repentance is as old as time itself, as we shall see from the Hebrew perspective. While the theme of repentance is discussed in the Torah, the Psalms, and the Prophets, it is not a quality that belongs solely to the Jewish people. It is in fact universal.

Hebrew Perspective: Repentance is a powerful theme in Jewish and Christian theology. There is a story that says when the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, the Jewish people went into despair, searching for answers and meaning and hope in all the devastation. They asked their leaders why and what could they do now that the Temple was gone? Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai replied, “We have done wrong, but we can still repent.” Though the Temple was gone, repentance remained. Repentance was more important than the Temple. Another tradition (this one based in Scripture) says that seven things were created before the world began: the Torah, the Throne of God, the Garden of Eden, Hell, the Temple, the name of the Messiah, and Repentance. From where comes the tradition that repentance was made before the world? From Psalm 90:2-3 in which it is written “before you formed the earth, you said to man ‘return’” (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer). The word “return” is also the root word for “repent.” Thus in Jewish tradition repentance is so important that God had prepared it even before He made man who needed it.

First Reading - Jonah 3:1-5, 10: The Book of Jonah is read and studied during Yom Kippur in the synagogue. Yom Kippur is the great day of repentance in Jewish tradition. The reading of Jonah reminds people that repentance can be done on any day, not just on Yom Kippur, and that salvation belongs to the Gentiles, too. It’s interesting that on the holiest day of the Jewish year the tradition is to read a book about Gentiles repenting, for God is the King of the Universe, not just the King of Israel. The poignant verse in today’s passage is verse 10, which says, “God saw what they did.” Repentance is more than a change of heart and emotion. Repentance is also an action. Repentance is something visible so that, in the case of Nineveh, it could be seen by God.

Second Reading - Psalm 62:6-14: David appears to have composed this Psalm during a time of adversity and trouble. The opponents are not named, yet they use their power and wealth to oppress and are most likely known to him. Despite the trouble, the psalm portrays no hint of fear nor despair at the future and interestingly asks the Lord for nothing. It is simply an acknowledgment that our hope is in the Lord, that He is a sure rock of salvation. It also gives an injunction for the soul to wait patiently for God. In these troubled times, this psalm reminds us of the truth that we can have confidence in the Lord’s care.

Third Reading - 1 Corinthians 7:29-31: Rabbi Akiva was asked by his students, “When should we repent?” Akiva answered cryptically, “One day before you die!” This begs the question, when will we die? Of course, for most of us, we do not know the time or the season of that personal event. Paul has been criticized for this

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passage in Corinthians for declaring the “time to be short.” However, Paul is not making a prophecy regarding time and the soon return of Jesus. Rather he is encouraging believers to go about their daily lives in readiness and anticipation of the expected advent of the Messiah. One aspect of that readiness is not to put down roots too deep in a world that is passing away and another is to be in a state of repentance.

Fourth Reading - Mark 1:14-20: The public ministry of Jesus greatly expands following the imprisonment of John the Baptist. Jesus continues preaching as John had done, that is, in calling the people to repent and linking repentance with the Kingdom of Heaven. The Gospels record that some of the first words of Jesus after He returns from 40 days in the desert are to repent, and Revelation records that some of the last words of Jesus are also to repent for He is coming quickly. The Good News begins in Galilee, which is a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 9. The Kingdom of Heaven is breaking into the world, and there will be healing, redemption, and blessing. The Good News comes with an urgent call to follow Jesus. Following Jesus will be a journey of transformation, but it is not separated from repentance. The Greek word translated “repent” – μετανοεῖτε (*metanoete*) – is a present tense form which indicates continuous action. That means that Jesus wants His disciples to live in a state of ongoing repentance and faithfulness.

Hebrew Context: The Kingdom of Heaven is a familiar Second Temple Period term used to describe the rule and reign of God in the universe. Jesus did not initiate the Kingdom of Heaven. If we asked a rabbi when did the Kingdom of Heaven began, he would most assuredly answer Exodus 15:18: “The Lord reigns forever and ever.” This verse is the first kingly image of God in the Scriptures. God became King when He redeemed Israel from Egypt and they accepted His kingship. For God to rule and reign in our lives, then our lives must submit to His will. This begins with an acknowledgment that we have not always followed His will and then engage in the action of repentance. In a rabbinic tradition, repentance is also linked to the messianic kingdom, for repentance brings the King Messiah near and gets us expectant that God will rule and reign even more through His Messiah (Yoma 86a). As Jesus says, this is Good News.

ACNA Addendum

Jeremiah 3:19-4:4: The call to repentance and returning to the Lord resonates strongly in the prophets. Known as the “weeping prophet,” the ministry of Jeremiah oversaw the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians. In this passage we see God desire that unfaithful Israel repents and returns to Him. This act of repentance comes with a promise from the Lord that will not only heal the unfaithful in Israel but also provide truth, justice, and blessing to the nations. The repentance of Israel will affect the world itself. As Paul says in Romans 11:15, “For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead.”

Psalms 130: This is another of the pilgrim songs of ascent that was traditionally prayed as pilgrims went up to Jerusalem for the Feasts of the Lord. As the faithful headed to Jerusalem and to the Temple to worship God, they would contemplate their sins and the need to repent before coming into the presence of the Lord. The psalm is full of hope and wonder at the goodness of God and His unfailing love. The psalm begins with a plea for the mercy of God and ends with the declaration that God will indeed redeem the people from their sins.

1 Corinthians 7:17-24: The call of Jesus to enter the Kingdom of Heaven and the call to repent are universal, for both Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles do not have to become Jews to have access to God nor to have the opportunity to repent. Likewise, Jews do not become Gentiles when they repent and return to the Lord. Paul here reminds the Corinthians, a community of both Jewish and Greek believers, that each remains before the

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Lord in the station they had when the Lord called them. What was important to Paul was “keeping God’s commandments,” which are written on the believers’ hearts. Maintaining the social status of Jews and Gentiles and living peacefully together as a united community would add to the attraction of the Gospel and further expand the Kingdom of Heaven.

Further Reading: On Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven: Vermes, Geza. *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. Fortress Press, 1993. Chapter 5.

About the author

The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied at the Hebrew University in the Master’s program with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied Psychology and Sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek, is fluent in German and Hebrew, and has taught internationally including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.