

Good morning, God's people!

Our readings today draw us into this week's seeking question: How do we begin again?

Remember a time when your life took a turn.

Maybe you were invited to a new beginning, like Abraham and Sarah. You were content with your life and knew what to expect, but a turn called to you. You worried about taking these steps into the unknown, but you also genuinely wondered, felt yourself come alive thinking about, what this new beginning could look like.

Maybe, like Nicodemus, you've found yourself stuck, confused. The things you thought you knew or could rely on have shifted. You want to follow the path of your life, but you've got about as much visibility and direction as trying to find your way in the middle of the night. You want to understand. You want things to get better. But you wonder, is a new beginning even possible for me?

There are many turns in life. They are not all positive, fair, or even explainable. They do not all come from God. Many turns we experience break our hearts, and they break God's heart too.

In Lent, there is a turn that we focus on a lot. This is the turn of repentance. Repentance, at its core, is the act of turning away from what separates us from God and our neighbor. Even more, repentance is choosing to turn back to God. To make a turn that leads to a new beginning, to new and eternal life.

But, just like I said last week when we were focusing on sin, I don't think the Church is awesome at talking about repentance.

I am not saying we shouldn't talk about it. That would be just one more way to ignore real pain and suffering, in the world, in our lives and also within ourselves. Ignorance is a particularly painful way to make sure things stay exactly as they are. That's not life and it's definitely not life with God. We are a people on the move. Marching to Zion.

And we can't get to where we're going if we can't recognize where we are. Repentance is a part of the path to liberation. So, no, I don't think we should scrap or downplay repentance.

It's our understanding of repentance that could use some work.

In her recent book, *Practice the Pause: Jesus' Contemplative Practice, New Brain Science, and What It Means to Be Fully Human*, Caroline Oakes laments the way repentance is associated with punishment and depravity in the Christian tradition. She rightly notes that brain science tells us shame-based teaching does not lead to permanent or positive change. The decline in people who identify as Christian is also a pretty good data point.

"But doesn't Jesus tell us to repent?!" a certain curly-headed, anxious preacher might ask.

Yes...and no.

Before we get into this, I need you to repeat after me: Meta (Meta). Noia (Noia). Metanoia (Metanoia). Once more, with Spirit: Metanoia! (Metanoia!)

Metanoia is the Greek word Jesus uses throughout the gospels that we have translated as repent.

To quote Oakes, "[But] metanoia is actually not at all related to a feeling of remorse or contrition, or of deep regret for an action, or of needing penance, or of any of the other unhelpful and, at times, yes, tragic interpretations of repentance that we've adopted through church teachings.

The concept of metanoia has a far more powerful meaning and intent than repentance does, and yet there is no English word that can fully capture its powerful and transcendent meaning. The Greek prefix meta means "beyond" or "outside of," ... with the suffix noéo, meaning "mind" or "thinking" or "perception," then meta-noia is "beyond the obstructions of one's mind, one's usual perceptions, or thoughts." ...

Metanoia is generally understood today to be a dramatic reorientation, a call to go beyond. [Such] that Jesus and John the Baptist are actually calling us into an altogether different reality than that of repentance. They are calling us into a “cosmic shift in mind and heart,” to higher and deeper levels of awareness and understanding, beyond our fight/flight mind, beyond the identities that each of us and our particular culture have created.”¹

So many of us learned that Jesus calls us to begin again by way of punishment and judgment. To begin in a way that emphasizes our awfulness in order to better appreciate God’s grace. God doesn’t need shame to beef up the power of grace. Anyone who has experienced God’s grace knows that, even if that knowing has been buried somewhere deep down. That knowing that you are wonderfully and beautifully made; endlessly loved by God. Whatever turns your life has taken, that knowing is not dead. It can and will rise again.

I want to share the examples Oakes uses in her book to show the dramatic and meaningful difference between the “repent” mistranslation and the more original metanoia understandings. Listen:

- In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is not calling on the people to “Repent: The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Jesus is actually calling on the people to “Metanoete[14]—See beyond your mind, your usual way of seeing: The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2 and 4:17).
- In Mark, when Jesus sent his disciples out two by two, the disciples did not “proclaim that all should repent” (Mark 6:7–12). Jesus’ disciples actually “proclaimed that all should metanoōsin[15]—see with the eyes of their heart, with the deepest part of their being, with their true selves.”
- In Acts, Paul is not telling the Athenians that “God now commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Paul is actually telling the Athenians that “God now commands all people everywhere to metanoein[16]—see beyond their mind, to see through an entirely new field of awareness, to see through the eyes of their innermost selves in God.”²

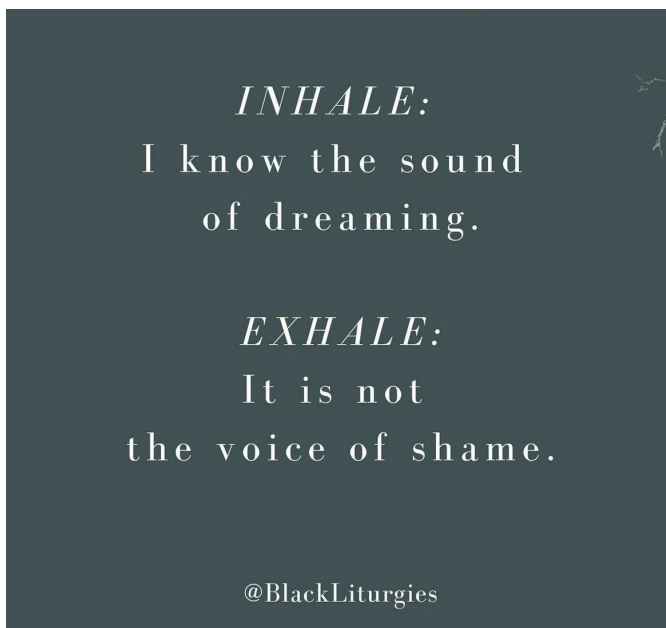
¹ Oakes, Caroline. *Practice the Pause* (pp. 21-23). Broadleaf Books. Kindle Edition.

²Ibid., 22.

“What if, throughout our lives, every time we had heard the call to repent, we understood it to be an impassioned invitation to try to wake up and see beyond our mind’s usual reflexive way of thinking, to see bigger, and to try to see with God’s eyes? To listen with God’s love?”³

Doesn’t that just sound a lot more like Jesus? Than the belief that our turn to God begins with depravity instead of possibility?

As Cole Arthur Riley captures in one of her recent Lenten breath prayers:



What Jesus shows us in his life is that this way of metanoia takes intention and practice. In all of the gospels, Jesus consistently takes time to pause and pray. To strengthen his God-given and innately human capacity to participate in the life of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Next week during adult ed, we will spend more time with Oakes book, Practice the Pause, and get into how we can deepen our capacity to follow Christ’s command to go beyond.

As I wrap up, I want to name that some of us may find metanoia scarier than shame-based repentance. New beginnings always come at a cost, namely that you recognize something is ending. It didn’t work out like you thought or even hoped. Sometimes

³ Ibid., 23.

holding fast to what we have or wanted, even if it no longer fulfills us, can feel less scary than opening ourselves to what we don't know how to control or even just receive.

Others of us may be tempted to turn metanoia into another action plan. A way to help us feel like we're doing something in a world that not only rewards productivity but also a world where there really is just so much that does need to be done.

Earlier this week, I was in a time of guided meditation with my spiritual director. I was exhausted, and, rather than feeling that, I was chasing after the meaning of it. I needed the sense of gaining wisdom from putting in the effort. All of a sudden, I heard myself say, "I think I'm done for today." My director affirmed my decision, but also observed I had placed my hand on my heart. "What if," she offered, "we just stayed in this place for a few minutes? Know my heart is sending compassion to you, I am here with you."

What I noticed is that, with a moment to be still, I could claim that exhaustion without being overtaken by it. And I started to become aware of my director's genuine compassion. And of God's presence and love. An expansion that goes beyond words.

I have to believe that is where Jesus always started, being still until he remembered that the first thing we experience in metanoia, when we go beyond, is how very much God loves us and is with us. Metanoia is an invitation, one that begins with God meeting us where we are.

Lent is an invitation to be present to where you are. Believing God will meet you there. And in that meeting, our hearts and minds and lives will be opened to a new beginning, an irresistible turn. May it be so. Amen.