

## *The Promise*

### **Acts 2:36-41**

Wayne Eberly

July 21, 2019

“Repent!” With that single word, I am afraid I may have lost many of you. *Repent* is a word used by Peter in this sermon he preaches on the Day of Pentecost. Repent is a word that can draw to mind images of judgment, damnation, rejection, and a fiery hell. When I tell you that Peter’s sermon seems to be closely connected to the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist, who appeared in the Judean desert in Luke 3, it might cement in your mind the images of judgment, damnation, rejection, and a fiery hell. To the gathered crowd, John the Baptist used these unwelcoming words of welcome. “You brood of vipers!” The call to worship wasn’t much better. “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” His sermon was brief. “The ax is already at the root of the trees.” His benediction brought no comfort. “Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” I wonder how many lined up that Sunday to thank the preacher for his sermon. I mention the connection between Peter and John the Baptism because Luke tells us John came preaching a baptism of repentance. There it is, that word *repent*.

If *repent* is only a word of judgment, a word that brings damnation, a word of rejection, a word focused on the fires of hell, it would be tempting to pluck it out of the passage, to remove it, or to ignore it. If *repent* is a word that has been used to hurt you, or to hurt others, I want to express my deepest sadness. I’m sorry. Philip Yancey recounts a story about a woman in a desperate situation. It was a terrible story of brokenness, bondage, heartache, failure, and sin. Someone finally asked the woman if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. The person telling the story said they would never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. “Church!” she cried. “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.”<sup>1</sup> That story breaks my heart. To think that someone would come to church, perhaps feeling bad, or carrying a burden, suffering with sorrow, and that

---

<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, 11.

the church would only make them feel worse, that brings me great pain. For all the times *repent* has only served to make people feel worse, to bring judgment, damnation, rejection, and threats of a fiery hell, I say I am so sorry.

And yet I do not want to pluck the word *repent* out of our passage. I do not want to remove the word *repent* from our passage. And I definitely do not want to ignore the word *repent*. I want to be up front about the word *repent*. *Repent* does include aspects of judgment, damnation, rejection, and threats of fiery hell. But *repent* encompasses more than those things. And if we can grasp how much more *repent* means than simply judgment my hope is that you would find in this very important word the promise of new life, for surely in our passage today, repentance leads to new life. Repentance is part of the gospel. And when we tell the gospel story, the story of Jesus Christ, the gospel is always good news.

With our attention drawn to the word *repent*, we find in Acts 2 that Peter preaches a sermon on the Day of Pentecost that cuts the listeners to the heart. The sermon proclaims that Jesus, a man accredited by God through miracles, wonders and signs, was put to death. Those listening to the sermon bore responsibility for the death of Jesus. This must have been a hard sermon to hear, as Peter clearly portrays the truth that everyone listening had a hand in the suffering and death of Jesus. “You (all the listeners) with the help of wicked people, put Jesus to death by nailing him to the cross.” Sensing they have been part of a grievous wrong committed not only against Jesus, but also a wrong committed against God, the crowd, collectively and individually, cries out, “What shall we do?” They do not deny their part in this terrible act. Instead, owning their part in this terrible act, they just want to know what they can do. Peter’s words cover the crowd not with bitter judgment, but rather with the hope of a new beginning. “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the Holy Spirit.”

A grievous wrong has been committed. It is a wrong worthy of judgment. The Son of God has been put to death. And yet somehow in the death and the resurrection of Jesus, the judgment has been poured out on Jesus, taken by Jesus, and through his suffering and death a new

possibility has emerged. People can now repent. Repentance can mean a change of mind. Repentance can mean a feeling of regret or remorse. And repentance can mean turning away from sin and turning back to God. The people are cut to the heart. Although the crowd certainly feels regret and remorse, what stands out when Peter preaches is that this watershed event in the relationship between God and humans, the death and resurrection of Jesus, now provides the amazing opportunity to turn away from sin, from those things that pull us away from God, and to turn back to God. Repentance is intimately linked with the forgiveness of sin. The forgiveness of sin clears away the wrongs, the brokenness, the rebellion, the pride, the selfishness, the hardheartedness, and opens the door to a new way of living, a new way of living where we are in a right relationship with God and...a right relationship with our fellow human beings. Repentance is intimately linked to the forgiveness of sins. And lest we miss the crucial point, the forgiveness of sins is intimately linked to repentance. The forgiveness of sins does not stand alone. The forgiveness of sins empowers us to live a new life, a changed life, even a transformed life.

If we only have the forgiveness of sins without repentance, we might end up with the situation Jesus describes in Matthew 18. A servant owes his master the equivalent of 20 years of wages. It is a massive debt. He begs his master for forgiveness and the master graciously forgives the entire debt. This is a story about forgiveness, a grand and glorious forgiveness. But there is no repentance. Having been forgiven this massive debt that same servant will not forgive his fellow servant a debt that is minuscule in comparison. His debt was forgiven, but his life was not changed. That is wrong and that is tragic. Imagine a different outcome to that parable. What if someone forgiven such a huge debt repented, changed direction in their life, lived in a new way? The possibilities are limitless. That new life could be filled with generosity and kindness, compassion and concern, gratitude and a giving spirit. That is the possibility before us today. Peter proclaims a great and glorious act of forgiveness. Jesus Christ suffered and died to forgive our sins. In what new ways might we live in response to that amazing act of love and forgiveness? Repentance is our act of living in a new way.

The Old Testament provides a powerful example of the link between forgiveness and a new way of living. The act of forgiveness is found in Leviticus 16. Do you love the image of the psalmist that as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sin from us? Have you ever allowed yourself to find peace in the promise from the prophet that though our sin is like scarlet it shall be as white as snow? Leviticus 16 is a chapter that fuels the faith that our sins are forgiven. Leviticus 16 is a living illustration of what God does to forgive our sins. If you look at the heading in your Bible for Leviticus 16, there is a good chance it will read, “The Day of Atonement.” Atone means to cover, and Leviticus 16 tells how Israel can be sure God covers their sin.

When the tabernacle was constructed, and the tabernacle prefigured the temple, there was a sacred space that was called the Most Holy Place. Only the high priest could go into the Most Holy Place, and that was only one time a year. That one time a year the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place was on the Day of Atonement. Before entering the Most Holy Place, the high priest selected two male goats. When the two male goats had been selected, one of the goats was chosen to be offered as a sacrifice. When the goat was sacrificed, the high priest was to take some blood from the goat, take it into the Most Holy Place, and sprinkle it on the altar, on what was called the atonement cover. In this way the blood of the goat that was sacrificed would make atonement for the sin of the people of Israel. The sprinkled blood on the atonement cover was a sign and a symbol that God had forgiven the people.

But remember, there were two goats selected. With the goat that was not sacrificed, the high priest was to “lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness...the goat will carry on itself all the sins of the people to a remote place...” (Leviticus 16:21, 22) The live goat literally escapes into the wilderness. The fact that the goat escapes explains the name given to the live goat. The live goat is the scapegoat.

Though your sins are like scarlet...those words might well ring out in the Most Holy Place as the blood of the sacrificed goat was spread on the atonement cover...though your sins are like scarlet I will make them as white as snow. As far as the east is from the west...those words might well echo through the wilderness as the scapegoat carries the sins of the people far, far away. As far as the east is from the west, so far shall I remove your sins from you.

What makes Leviticus such a powerful example for us is there is a link between the dramatic events of forgiveness on display in the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), and later chapters in Leviticus that demonstrate a new way of living. On the Day of Atonement, the priest confesses all the people did that was wrong. Leviticus 19 is a chapter that spells out a way of living that is right. Leviticus 19 imagines a way of living that demonstrates a right relationship with God and a right relationship with fellow human beings. The opportunities to live a new life are too numerous to go over one by one, but they invite us into a world where the weak and vulnerable are protected, where family relationships are nurtured, where the poor and hungry are provided for, where honesty prevails and integrity flourishes. In what is certainly more than a coincidence, Leviticus 19 is the very chapter that has the verse that says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18b) What is truly amazing is that even that verse about neighbor love doesn't fully capture just how we can embrace the new way of living that comes with God's great and glorious gift of forgiveness. Leviticus 19 also calls us to love the foreigner who resides among us. We are not to mistreat the stranger, the foreigner, or the alien. In fact, we are to love the foreigner and to love the alien, as we love ourselves. Where do we get the power to live in this new way, with a love for neighbor and a love for the other? That Day of Atonement, that gift of forgiveness empowers the people of God to make incredible changes. The power of forgiveness enables us to repent, to chart a new course in our life, in our relationship with God, in our relationship with one another. There is a link between forgiveness and repentance, between forgiveness and living in new ways that allow life to flourish.

And then Leviticus holds out a vision of life for us that is almost too good to be true. In Leviticus 25 we are told that once every 50 years there is to be a Year of Jubilee. Even with the practices of Leviticus 19 like loving our neighbor, things get out of balance. People get pushed to the margins. They become indebted. People are hanging to life by a thread, times become desperate, the vulnerable are crushed. So, once every 50 years the trumpet is sounded, and a Year of Jubilee is declared. All debts are cancelled. People who have been pushed to the margins are invited back in and they receive a do over. What makes the Year of Jubilee so unique is that the ones who offer the forgiveness of debts, the ones who cover the debt, are the Israelites. Those who have, those who have prospered, those who possess, take from their abundance and share. They forgive the ones who are indebted. They give land and homes back to those who are without. They loan money without interest. They create jobs so those without can work to support themselves and their families. Talk about a new way of living.

In my studies of the Year of Jubilee I came across a phrase that has become very dear to me. Jubilee affirms that every person has the inalienable right of belonging. That word inalienable ought to ring a bell for us. The founding of our nation was based on the belief that all people have certain inalienable rights. And when I say it ought to ring a bell, I am thinking of our nation's Liberty Bell. The Liberty Bell contains a verse directly from the book of Leviticus, directly from Leviticus chapter 25, directly from the Year of Jubilee. "Proclaim liberty throughout the land" is inscribed on our nation's Liberty Bell. That verse is Leviticus 25:10. I pray the vision and the promise of loving our neighbor and loving the stranger and alien and the promise of a Year of Jubilee when the bells of freedom ring out declaring the inalienable right of belonging, I pray that the call to repentance stirs within us the hope of a world where we live in right relationship with our God and in right relationship with our neighbor, with all our neighbors. And before we give up and say such things will never happen, such things are only a dream, let me just say that the Year of Jubilee begins on the tenth day of the seventh month, which just so happens to be the Day of Atonement. When the great and glorious gift of forgiveness showers the people of God, there are no limits to how we respond, to how we repent, to how we live in new ways.

And if there are no limits to how we respond to the gift of forgiveness given on the Day of Atonement, there are certainly no limits to how we respond when we discover our forgiveness is bought for us through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. God's Beloved Son died so that we might truly live. The words of Peter that call us to repentance are rich with reference to Jesus. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Oh friends, we are not stuck. We are not destined to walk a path that separates us from God. We are not bound by our past. We are not limited by our future. All things are possible with God. The gift of forgiveness that is poured out through the love Jesus Christ showed on the cross is a gift that opens wide the doors for us to live in new ways.

We were watching the morning news Wednesday when they announced it was National Hot Dog Day. In case you missed it this year, National Hot Dog Day is July 17<sup>th</sup>. I was thinking about what it might look like to live in new ways, in ways that bring life and hope, when the television told me it was National Hot Dog Day. My thoughts immediately ran to Dick and Pam Klein, dear friends of ours when we lived in Houston. One night, Dick and Pam invited us over to dinner and Dick grilled some hot dogs. The hot dogs were grilled to perfection I might add. While this might not seem like a big deal, the fact that Dick and Pam are Jewish, and that they had also invited a very sweet family of six Muslim children over along with our Christian family lets you know this was a very special evening. The six Muslim children, the Wahabzaba family, had been orphaned. Their parents were put to death in Afghanistan, and the children came to Houston as refugees. They were refugees, and they were orphans. Pam Klein took on a mother's role with the six orphaned Muslim children. There we were that night, sharing a meal of hot dogs prepared by a Jewish man for a family of six Muslim children. And there was warmth and love between all present. A night like that reminds me there are no limits to the new ways we might live in our world.

There is more to the story of Pam and Dick Klein. Pam had come to Interfaith Ministries about a year before that night. Julie was working with the volunteers who came to Interfaith Ministries and she met Pam. Pam told Julie that she had a deep hurt in her life and was looking for a way to

serve others. Julie connected Pam with the Refugee Resettlement Program and Pam became a mother to several of the Sudanese refugees, called the Lost Boys. Although the Lost Boys were Christian, the difference in faith was not a hindrance for Pam, a Jewish woman, as she reached out in love.

Pam became special friends with a young boy named James. Unfortunately, James was very sick and spent most of his time in the hospital. Pam visited him frequently. When December rolled around Pam came to Julie and said she wanted to do something special for James. She asked if Julie had any ideas. Julie suggested that Pam bring Christmas to James in the hospital. This seemed like a great idea, except for one small problem. Pam said to Julie, "I'm a Jew. I don't know how to do Christmas!" Julie told Pam how to do Christmas, and sure enough Pam, a Jewish woman, brought Christmas to James, a young Christian man.

When James did not improve, and his death drew near, Pam came to his bedside. The night James died, Pam held him in her arms. Although the sadness was deep, Pam shared that an equally deep healing took place in her life. It turned out that the thing that motivated Pam to help others was that her son had been murdered ten years before. Pam's son died alone, with no one to hold him. Now, in reaching out in service and love, Pam had been given the opportunity to give the gift to someone else that had been denied her son. She held the dying boy as he passed from this life to the next.

Experiences like this bring me great hope. Experiences like this remind me there are no limits to the new ways we might live in our world. A few weeks after that hot dog dinner, Pam joined with a group of Christian and Muslim women, men, and children, in an interfaith work project. Together they made lap quilts for seniors. There was great joy as people of faith, albeit different faiths, worked together to help others and make a difference in their community. Then when the work project was over, Pam came to our church for dinner. She came and the others who were Muslim and Hindu and Christian came, and we all had dinner together. It just so happened that Pam's husband Dick had devised his own work project for our Day of Service. That Sunday night, Dick Klein, our dear Jewish friend, was there at our church cooking hot dogs for a

group of Presbyterians, and Muslims, and Hindus, and Jews. I think it is safe to say that was the best tasting hot dog I ever had. Experiences like that remind me there are no limits to what God can do.

Today we hear the good news of the forgiveness of Jesus Christ that sets us free from all the sin and sadness that binds us. This gift sets us free so we can live new lives. So, it is when Peter calls on us to repent, my heart races. Repent, there is new life waiting for us. With glad and grateful hearts, may we live into the fullness of this new life we have been given, the new life that comes through the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.