

# “Repenting”

Zephaniah 3:14-17 & 20 & Luke 3:2-16

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December 12, 2021

**Prayer for Understanding** God, whose love is like the sun warming me from the inside, if you are my home, then your word is the street light guiding me there. So, I want you to know—I am walking your way, we are walking your way, and we are looking for a light. And our feet are dirty—we have lost our way a time or two. And our bags are heavy—we are carrying an array of grief and fear on our backs. But we are on our way. We are looking for your light. We are listening for your word. When you see us coming, when you feel our hearts move, we hope you will run down the driveway and catch us. Leave the light on. We are on our way home. Gratefully we pray, amen.

The prophet Zephaniah proclaims the joy of home that Jesus is bringing to us. **Zephaniah 3:14-17 & 20 NLT** “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! For the Lord will remove God’s hand of judgment and will disperse the armies of your enemy. And the Lord himself, the King of Israel, will live among you! At last, your troubles will be over and you will never again fear disaster. On that day the announcement to Jerusalem will be, “Cheer up, Zion! Do not be afraid! For the Lord your God is living among you. God is a mighty savior. God will take delight in you with gladness. With God’s love, God will calm all your fears. God will rejoice over you with joyful songs.” God will gather you together and bring you home again.”

John the Baptist’s good news sounds harsh. He preaches a home for all—where inequities are banished, valleys are lifted up and all have the resources they need for collective flourishing. Ultimately, John’s message is one of joy. We are called to collectively build and repair the structures of our society. We are called to be community builders. Wherever we build, God is there. What we build should be a place with a large table that has a place for all.

A reading from the gospel of Luke. **Luke 3:2-16 NLT** “A message from God came to John son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who was living in the wilderness. Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. Isaiah had spoken of John when he said, “He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming! Clear the road for him! The valleys will be filled and the mountains and hills made level. The curves will be straightened and the rough places made smooth. And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.’” When the crowds came to John for baptism, he said, “You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Do not just say to each other, ‘We are safe, for we are descendants of Abraham and Sarah.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Sarah and Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.” The crowds asked, “What should we do?” John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.” Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?” John replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.” “What should we do?” asked some soldiers. John replied, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.” Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Elder Vilmarie Cintron Olivier writes: “John’s words might sound harsh however it is a message of good news—of change, forgiveness, and justice—to a suffering people. God called John for a specific place and time. His cry from the wilderness proclaimed leveled valleys and righted wrongs. This was, and is, a message of joy, especially for those who had lost hope, hurt by the inequities and injustices perpetrated by the empire and the religious

authorities aligned with it. The world as they knew it was about to change. Crowds came to John to be baptized, and he charged them with “bearing fruit worthy of repentance”, not relying on past accomplishments, heritage, or lineage, rather producing their own fruit, living, and acting in ways that demonstrated true change. Resting on their laurels for far too long, the crowd was not quite sure how to do that, so John offers words of wisdom. Instead of accumulating, share with others what you have. Instead of being indifferent or selfish, show consideration and compassion. Instead of taking advantage and preying on the vulnerable, be satisfied with what you have and treat others fairly and with dignity even if you work for the empire. What implications does John's message have for us community builders today? If “all people shall see the salvation of God”, we all have a part to play in the salvation story, in leveling valleys and righting wrongs. Like John, we are also called for a specific place and time: Here and now. Be at the ready, to bear fruit worthy of repentance, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving voice to the silenced and oppressed, speaking truth to power, and protecting and empowering the vulnerable. Let our collective voice cry out in the wilderness—and everywhere—with exhortations and good news. And, as the message is heard, more and more people will join us in building the community of God, making it truly a home for all.”

Pastor Lisle Gwynn Garrity writes, “Perhaps the path toward creating a home for all requires some deconstruction. Some of our structures are rotting. Some of our institutions are compromised. Some of our rituals need repair. And yet, nothing is beyond redemption. Collective belonging gives way for collective joy—joy that is free and full.” What particular structures, systems, or rituals need to be deconstructed? What systems is God rebuilding and redeeming?” How will you partner with God in building a home of love, peace and joy for everyone?

Repenting entails self-awareness and action, interior illumination and outer grace. Repenting is identifying where you have failed to give and receive love, then transforming into ever growing ways of extravagant love. Repenting is becoming aware that you have two coats and someone else has no coat, so you give your extra coat to them.

John the Baptist urges us to remove barriers. The first step to removing barriers is identifying them. How do you hinder God's love in your life? How do we, as a worldwide family, children of God, hinder God's love?

Once we have identified the barriers to love, John urges us to remove them in partnership with the Holy Spirit. Together, God and you, and all people, are to chop down every barrier to love, chop down every action of fear, hate and division, chop down all that diminishes life. Together with the fire of the Holy Spirit we are to burn these barriers transforming them into heat and light to fuel love, to illumine a home for all, to warm a safe sanctuary for all, to be ablaze with the pure love that is within each of us.

Jesus comes to remove every barrier, to weave all people together with love. Jesus comes to inspire us to implement John's agenda of reform, a home for all, where all enjoy food, clothes and safety, sustained by a fair government, a journey home for all on a smooth, straight, super-highway, a celebrate of God's redeeming grace freely given to all people. Or in John and Isaiah's words. **“Clear the road! The valleys will be filled and the mountains and hills made level. The curves will be straightened and the rough places made smooth. And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.”**

As John preached people saw our glorious home. They asked, how do we get there? By repenting, removing barriers, transforming, and loving action for all people.

How do we do this? Pick a facet of love. Perhaps compassion, peace, joy, forgiveness, creativity, goodness, grace, glory, completeness, service, delight, shalom or another facet of love.

Once you have your facet of love take 10 minutes in the morning, every day, to meditation on it. For several years I have been repenting to joy. Let go of each thought that is not a form of the facet of love you have chosen. When a negative thought about a person enters my mind, I replace it with something I appreciate about them. When I fret that I need to be productive, I replace it by reminding myself that God delights in me, for me just being myself. When I think of something I wish I had, I replace it with gratitude for what I enjoy. Keep coming back to your facet of love. For me it is joy. After each thought I say the word ‘joy’. When an image of someone enters my mind, for example Bob. I say one of the following: God delights in Bob. God wants Bob to be joyful. God is filling Bob with joy. I examine my life over the past day. What joyful moments can I share with others today? How will I express this joy? I look at my schedule. How can I do each task in a joyful way? If there are some tasks that diminish my joy, then how will I replenish my joy? Perhaps enjoying a bike ride, popcorn, a quick glance at a picture of a mountain. I sign most of my emails with the word joy, reminding me that each correspondence is an opportunity to bless others and myself with joy. I read scripture on joy. A couple of my favorite are, ‘This is the day the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad.’ and ‘Jesus came to fill me with joy and make my joy complete’. I read books on joy. Think about how you can permeate your day with the facet of love you have chosen.

Reflection is a key pivot of repentance. Take time at the end of the day to review your day in the light of your facet of love. Celebrate the moments where your facet flourished. Analyze the moments when your facet was absent. What could you have done differently? How will you do it different, or be different, tomorrow? Answering these questions is the beginning of the transformation of repentance. Implementing them, doing them, living them more and more, in the future is the growth of repentance. Repenting is a continuous process of removing barriers and expanding every facet of love.

Most of us need zillions of tries to perfect a facet of love. Little by little we become more self-aware, recognizing the barriers. We see how we can live in a more loving way. We resolve to do it, or be it, in a more loving way in the future. This is how we repent, little by little.

Sometimes the way we resolve to change does not work out well. Then you missed the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Pause, listen, redo, over and over until your facet of love grows.

After a while, you might think, 'I am getting good at this'. That is your ego trying to separate and elevate yourself from others. Reject these type of thoughts. Our quest is the perfect love of God that overflows in all the myriad of facets, that should be your only litmus test. Living the facets of love never divides, rather always unites.

Repenting is how we prepare, how we remodel our heart for Jesus, how we celebrate that God lives with us. Repenting is us transforming the house of our heart into a true home for God. Repenting is how we transform the world uniting everyone in one family, all equal, all cherished, all celebrated in our true home, the kingdom of God. We are called to build one home for all.

Pastor Sarah Are Speed wrote the following poem about repenting entitled:

***Advocating for Home***

I know you don't feel at home in your body.  
Your clothes don't feel right.  
Your bones don't feel right.  
Your name, just a word that people have labeled you with.  
I see the way you try on pronouns like I try on clothes,  
looking for something—anything—that feels right.  
And what I would give to build you a shelter—  
a safe space where you could be,  
a home where you were safe and free.  
What I would give to carve out some room  
for you to process and grieve  
and dance and sing your way  
into your true self.  
But I know  
it's not that easy.  
My hands cannot build you safety.  
My words cannot give you time.  
My heart cannot be home enough.  
So until the day when you are truly at home,  
I will keep marching for you.  
I will keep advocating for the home you deserve—  
the home in your own skin.  
I will keep praying.  
I will give you my second coat,  
and the shirt off my back, and the food from my table.  
I won't give up on preparing the way.  
A voice is calling out in the wilderness.  
Do you hear it?  
There's more for us here than has been before.  
Amen