

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Third Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

RCL Readings – Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

ACNA Readings – Jeremiah 3:19-4:4, Psalm 130; I Corinthians 7:17-24; Mark 1:14-20

[\[Original\]](#)

Seasonal Introduction. Epiphany of the Lord is celebrated on the 6th of January in the Western Christian calendar and the season continues until Ash Wednesday and Lent. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning ‘showing forth, appearance, or manifestation’. During this season, the church celebrates the manifestation of the Messiah on earth between the time of His birth and preparation for His death and ascension. The Baptism of Jesus, His presentation at the Temple, and His transfiguration—all events with deep connections to Jewish life and history.

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,¹** as we shall see from the Hebrew perspective. The theme of repentance is discussed throughout the Jewish Scriptures, but in the Torah, the Psalms, and the Prophets it is not an action exclusively required of nor given to the Jewish people. The readings of Jonah further underscores that repentance is, in fact, universal.

Hebraic Context. What did Jesus come to do?² Jesus Himself declares that He came to, “preach the good news of the Kingdom of God³ ... because that is why I was sent.” (Luke 4:42-43) The Kingdom of Heaven was a familiar Second Temple Period term used to describe the rule and reign of God in the universe.

God’s rule and reign is not something occurring in the future but is a present reality. If we asked a rabbi, “When did the Kingdom of Heaven begin?” He would most assuredly answer “God established His kingdom during the Exodus”. This is sourced from the verses in Exodus 15:18:

¹ See **Hebraic Perspective**

² In Jewish tradition, you teach by asking questions. The invitation to give an answer is the invitation to become an active part of the learning process. Often, the appropriate response in this Jewish tradition is to reply with a question. The measure of your understanding of the Scriptures is based on the question given in reply.

³ The terms, “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” are synonymous. During the late 2nd Temple period, the pronunciation of the name of God was prohibited as a way to avoid taking the Lord’s name in vain. Taking the name of the Lord in vain was not just a question of words but also of action. Nonetheless, because disobedience in regard to taking the name of God in vain was considered to be a terrible sin (Yoma 86a), even the word “God” was replaced by words such as *Adonai* (my Lord), *haMakom* (the Place), *haShamayim* (the Heavens) or, currently, the preferred *haShem* (the Name). Matthew prefers to use the term Kingdom of Heaven, while Luke makes use of both expressions.

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“The Lord reigns forever and ever.” This verse is the first kingly image of God in the Scriptures.⁴ God became King when He redeemed Israel from Egypt and when they accepted His kingship at Mt. Sinai. It was at Mt. Sinai that the Lord addressed them as a ‘kingdom of priests’.

For God to rule and reign in our lives, then our lives must submit to His will. This begins when we acknowledge that we have not always followed His will but we must actually submit—starting with the practice 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.⁵ As Jesus says, this is **Good News**.⁶

Jonah 3:1-5, 10. According to the Jewish lectionary, the book of Jonah is read and studied during Yom Kippur in the synagogue. Yom Kippur is the greatest day of the Jewish calendar for fasting and repentance.⁷ The reading of Jonah reminds the people of Israel that repentance can be done on any day, not just on Yom Kippur; it also emphasizes that repentance is a possibility for anyone, regardless of their background, extending even to the Gentiles. It's interesting that on the holiest day of the Jewish year when Jewish people are repenting and confessing their sins that the tradition is to read a book about Gentiles repenting.

Why would God care about the souls of a city of foreigners that He would send a prophet to declare the word of the Lord? The answer is that God's rule and reign is not restricted to the people of Israel, but extended to the whole world. This thinking is reflected in the opening sentence of every Jewish blessing, מְלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ—“Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the Universe”. The traditional Jewish blessing proclaims that God is the king of the Universe, not just the king of Israel.

⁴ The Hebrew reads וְעַד לְעֹלָם וָעַד יְהוָה יִמְלֹךְ literally translate, “God will reign forever” while the Greek Septuagint translates Exodus 15:18 as κύριος βασιλεύων τὸν αἰῶνα καὶ ἐπὶ αἰῶνα καὶ ἔτι where the Greek verb βασιλεύω is in the present active tense, indicating the understanding that God is actively reigning now and forever.

⁵ Yoma 86b.2

⁶ Good News, sometimes translated as “The Gospel” is εὐαγγέλιον. [Josephus](#) – Ambassadors | [Appian](#) – Runners/Horsemen/Messengers... rare, but specific in both Greek and LXX writings. So why is it so popular in the NT? בִּשְׂרָרֵי Isaiah 61:1; Psalm 96:2-3; Psalm 68:11; see also: Psalm of Solomon 11:1; Midrash Psalm 147:1 Good news and Kingdom of God are related, “When the Holy One... will be King, they will all be messengers bearing Good News, as it is said, He who declares good things causes peace to be heard... The Holy One, blessed be He, is King; it is fitting to praise Him, Why? Because they are the dominion (מַלְכוּת) of the Holy One...”

⁷ Confession and repentance are not restricted to just one day of the year in Judaism. There is a daily prayer of confession and forgiveness called the *Vidui*, which forms part of the *Yom Kippur* liturgy, that is then used on many other occasions including daily prayer, upon retiring at night, or when death appears imminent.

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Jonah 3:10, “God saw what they did.” may stand out in our modern understanding of repentance in two ways. First, repentance is not simply about the emotions and heart, it is an action. It is observable.⁸

it is something that, as exemplified in Nineveh's case, God can witness. And the Ninevites repent without the use of sacrifice, and remarkably, the Lord accepts their repentance. This is a challenge to the traditional Christian view that (in the Old Testament) blood is required to remove sins. Here it clearly does not. Obedience—action—as always is better than blood sacrifice.

Psalm 62:5-12. The opening line titles the psalm to the conductor or chief musician and to Jeduthun. The identity of the conductor יְדֻתוּן is unknown with some commentators saying this is a reference to God as the ultimate leader of all musicians. Jeduthun's name appears also in Psalms 39 and 77. He is sometimes identified as one of David's appointed worship leaders as his name appears in 1 Chronicles 25:6 in that context. The core of the Psalm is a warning not to let power and prestige cause us to forget where true rest and salvation come from. While it is debated exactly when David penned these words, it is true that his life was one characterized by stress, tension and anxiety. David was hunted by many enemies and was engaged in a civil war with king Saul and his entourage. Whether David was writing this psalm during a moment of great stress and anxiousness as his enemies closed in or whether he was reflecting on those times from a position of comfort, David reminds us all that comfort and salvation come for God. The Lord is like a rock, impervious to harm and a solid foundation in which to rely upon, especially in times of trouble. Interestingly David doesn't ask for anything throughout the psalm. There is no appeal for destruction of the unnamed enemies, nor a request for fame and fortune. There is constant acknowledgment that our hope is in God. The concluding verse reminds us that God rewards according to our actions. This thought appears verbatim again in the Proverbs 24:12 then in the New Testament in both the words of Jesus and Paul, Matthew 16:27 and Romans 2:6. In the revelation of John the dead are judged before the great white throne 'according to their deeds' Rev 20:12 indicating how important or actions are in response to the grace and mercy of God. (Footnote - The discussion of action, doing and obedience often sets off heart palpitations in many Protestants. Charges of 'works-righteousness' then cloud the dialogue. The Protestant understanding of works-righteousness is heavily influenced by the Reformation. We need to move away from that centuries old debate of the reformers and the Romans Catholic Church and return the dialogue and narrative into the 1st Century of the disciples of Jesus. Faith in Hebrew is אֱמוּנָה *Emunah* and it is a 'gerund', that is a verb in action. An example of a gerund is a word ending in -ing such as 'looking' from the verb 'to look'. When you are actually doing the verb 'to look' you are 'looking'. The Hebraic mind understood that when you had faith you were putting that belief into action. In the context of Jesus' call to repentance we see in Matthew 3:8 that we should 'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.')

⁸ God repeatedly states that Israel should have God's law on their hearts

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I Corinthians 7:29-31. Some of Paul's statements in his epistles reveal that he held a personal belief that the final judgment was imminent. Rabbi Akiva was asked by his disciples; "When should we repent?" to which Rabbi Akiva answered cryptically, "One day before you die!" This begs the obvious 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 passage in Corinthians for declaring the "time to be short."⁹ However, in reality 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. Which Paul is assuming is close at hand. One aspect of being in that readiness is not to put down roots too deep in a world that is passing away (hence his insistence in avoiding marriage or engaging in extensive long term business deals) and another is to be in a state of repentance.

Mark 1:14-20. A prominent feature of Mark's gospel is the pacing. The narrative moves quickly from one event to another, many times using the adverb 'immediately' to maintain the pace. Sometimes Mark provides little pieces of information not included in other gospel accounts. For example only Mark notes the pillow in the boat during the 'calming of the storm' incident. At other times Mark's narratives can be quite short, such as when he provides scant details regarding Jesus' testing in the wilderness, wrapping the whole episode into 2 verses.¹⁰ 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 believe the good news'. The book of Revelation records that some of the last words of Jesus are also to repent for He is coming quickly. Geography is important in the Scriptures. Events are mentioned as occurring in specific places. The Good News begins in Galilee, which is a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-2; "The land of Zebulon and Naphtali ... By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in the Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Zebulon and Issachar are northern tribes whose ancient tribal allotments border the western section of the lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). There is a much overlooked passage in the first chapter of Leviticus that raised some interesting questions to the Jewish sages. Leviticus 1:11 instructs the Israelites to slaughter their sacrifices at the north side of the altar. The text of

⁹ Literally the text reads καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος τὸ λοιπὸν ἐστὶν 'the time is shortened' which could imply that Paul considered the pre-messianic age to be over and that the world was now in the 'days of the messiah' which results in the judgment of the world.

¹⁰ Paradoxically at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, the Spirit drives Him into wilderness away from the public into a private confrontation with the Enemy. Mark does not mention the three specific temptations of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13, instead Mark notes a constant 'being tempted' over a period of 40 days.

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Leviticus offers no reason for this command however the Jewish sages took this to imply that the redemptive process begins in the north. Psalm 75:6 reflects this thinking when the psalmist declares that exaltation does not come from the east, west or the desert (which is in the south), implying that the north is the direction that's important here. Naphtali, Zebulon along with Issachar are the tribes in the Galilee region and the gospel writers connect this prophecy to the ministry of Jesus geographically situated in the Galilee of the Gentiles. The Good News comes with an urgent call to follow Jesus who approaches the local fishermen Simon, Andrew, James and John inviting them to become His disciples. According to tradition all four men are former disciples of John the Baptist and have been prepared to expect the redeemer. Following Jesus will be a journey of transformation, but transformation begins with repentance. The Greek word translated “repent” – μετανοείτε (*metanoete*) – is an active present tense form which indicates a continuous action. Repentance is not something you do once, or on Sundays at a worship gathering. Jesus wants His disciples to live in a state of ongoing repentance and faithfulness.

Hebraic Perspective. Repentance is a powerful concurring theme in both 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 this horrific event has occurred 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.” The point here is that though the Temple was gone, repentance remained. Repentance was, and is, considered more important than the Temple. Another tradition (this one based in a literal reading of 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 (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer). From where comes the tradition that repentance was made before the world? The answer is from Psalm 90:2-3 in which it is written “before you formed the earth, you said to man ‘return’”. The word “return” שׁוּב *shuv* is also the root word for “repent.” תְּשׁוּבָה *teshuva*. One aspect of the Hebraic understanding of the word repentance is a returning to the place you were before, which for a sinner who had departed from God's presence is to be back in the presence of God. Hence one reading of Psalm 90 is that, ‘before you formed the earth, you said to man ‘repent’. Thus in Jewish tradition repentance is so important that God had prepared it even before He made man who needed it.

Optional Context 1

ACNA Readings

Jeremiah 3:19-4:4. The call to repentance and returning to the Lord resonates strongly throughout 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. In 3:22 and 4:1 God calls His people to ‘return’ שׁוּב

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shuv or 'repent'. Jeremiah 3:25 notes that returning to the Lord involves confession of sin as Israel acknowledges that throughout their history they have been disobedient to the Lord. Another important aspect of confession and repentance is the 'circumcision of the heart' (4:4). The actions of repentance are always linked to the attitude of the heart in the Hebrew Scriptures. 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 Gentile nations. The repentance of Israel is so powerful that it will affect the Gentile world as well. 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."

Psalm 130. Psalm 130 is part of the collection known as the Songs of Ascent.¹¹ There is no attributed author and so we have no context for the creation of the song. However it is clear from the text that the psalmist has every confidence that God will hear and respond to his cry of pain and deep distress. It was included in a group of psalms called Psalms of Confession by a Christian Roman Statesman named Cassiodorus. It is also a lament. Of the 150 Psalms in the book of Psalms, over 60 of them are laments. Interestingly, 125 of the 150 Psalms are quoted or alluded to in the New Testament with the majority of them being psalms of lament.¹² This psalm helps the worshipper, who may be a pilgrim attending one of the 3 pilgrimage festivals, see themselves as forgiven and ready to be in the presence of the Lord. The lament aspect coincides with the opening line in which confession begins with an understanding of how low we have fallen before God. It's from the depths that our cries for mercy and forgiveness being to ascend to the Lord. Psalms of lament always end with hope, the exception being Psalm 88. The psalmist tells Israel that hope in the Lord rests on His steadfast love and that God is full of redemptive love. The promise for the worshipper as he or she approaches Jerusalem and the Temple is that they, as part of Israel, will indeed be redeemed from all iniquity.

I 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 person remains before the 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

¹¹ According to the order of books in the Hebrew Bible of the Masoretic text, known as the Tanach (Torah, Prophets and Writings), Psalm 130:2 is noted as being in the middle of the last section called Writings. The Writings are the sacred history of the Jewish people in which the verse in the centre reads 'Lord hear my voice.'

¹² I say this 'interestingly' as there is the tendency in modern Churches to only recite the more jubilant psalms which might produce a false idea of the world. While God is constant, life is not and not everything in life is jubilant.

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peacefully together as a united community would add to the attraction of the Gospel and further expand the kingdom of Heaven.

Optional Context 2

Further reading. [if supplied]

Sources and Bibliography.

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

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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 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

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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 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.

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