

Why I came back around to repentance

First I needed to meet a progressive, gracious God.

by [Brittney Cooper](#) in the [November 17, 2021](#) issue



(Illustration by Tim Cook)

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the 13th in the new series.

As skepticism goes, I'm kind of a late bloomer. My twenties, which tracked exactly with the first decade of the 21st century, were an experiment in holding on to certainty long after my peers had, as a matter of shared quarter-life crisis, let it go. The times are never lacking in turbulence, and our particular turbulence was *Bush v. Gore*, 9/11, the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and an economic crash that shook the country to its core. Having grown up with a notion of God as an anchor in the time of storm and with a seeming front seat to the surely coming end times, I fancied my friends a foolhardy lot as they marched, I imagined, away from Jesus and toward debauched lives.

I wore dogma about the neck, literally spending most of college wearing a blue and white What Would Jesus Do lanyard with my keys on it. I was a walking billboard for Jesus freaks everywhere. At some point, the lanyard broke. I vaguely remember wondering as it fell to the ground whether this had some deeper spiritual meaning, whether I had, in some of my moral failings of late, become an unworthy ambassador for the faith. The most compassionate answer I can offer to myself is that dogma is a ready response to trauma. Dogma, especially the Christian brand, orders the world in a clear ledger of rules and rewards. It puts the puzzle together in a discernible image, undaunted by jagged and misshapen pieces.

But maybe we aren't puzzles. And maybe the goal isn't to fit. Letting go of my investment in a dogmatic, conservative notion of Christianity is perhaps the biggest change I have experienced in my faith walk of three decades. Instead, I have learned the art of embracing uncertainty, messiness, and divine surprises, in ways that have made my relationship to the divine more thrilling and confounding and scary, but less anxiety inducing and resentment filled.

At age 28, I staged my first act of religious insurrection: I joined a church that wasn't a Baptist church. The earth did not shake. But I'm sure I wobbled in my heels a bit. (I've never walked especially well in them anyway.) Perhaps I made this decision on the day the pastor stood and said that he would no longer preach to people about a fire-and-brimstone God come to punish them for their every sin. God, he said, had made it clear to him: "You have been misrepresenting me." My ears perked up. "I used to preach God like that," my soon-to-be pastor said, "but I will not preach him like that anymore."

I had never seen a pastor stand up in a pulpit and reverse course, never seen a pastor admit he was wrong and that his ideas about God had changed.

Later, I phoned my stepfather, my first pastor, with trepidation to confess what I'd done. This leaving the Baptists, with their certainty that if you didn't get dunked all the way under the water your baptism didn't matter, was serious business. Anticlimactic as ever, my dad replied, "You know enough by now to know if folks are the real deal or not." Exhale.

Changing your mind does not always feel as triumphant as it did the day I joined a not-Baptist church.

My dad, a dyed-in-the-wool, fire-baptized Baptist pastor, was telling me to resist orthodoxy and trust myself. I had not expected this. I had also not expected to meet a progressive, gracious God in an Alabama church. But here God was, challenging me to leave doctrinal certainty behind and kicking the crutch of fealty to tradition right out from under me.

And here was a pastor, changing his mind and inviting me to change mine. Changing one's mind is one of the ritual disciplines of the Christian faith. To change one's mind is one of the earliest definitions of the word *repentance*. It is a definition and practice that we should reclaim.

Because the Baptist church I grew up in is obsessed with notions of sin and repentance, for many years I believed I couldn't even approach God in prayer until I had dutifully catalogued a litany of the sins I had committed since the last time I had prayed. Quite often the process of prayer made me feel unworthy, unholy, and exhausted by my own inadequacy. And I was taught, and indeed believed, that these were the things I was always supposed to feel—inadequate and unworthy—so that I could be properly grateful for the extension of divine grace.

The consequence was that sometimes it simply felt better not to pray, not to be confronted day in and day out with my own shortcomings. Who wants to be in a relationship with someone who primarily sees all that is wrong with you and never what's good about you?

Thankfully, at some point I recognized that I could not live like that— perhaps because I simply could not carry the weight any longer. My mind started to change about who God is. I sought a more expansive gospel, one not tethered to rules, regulations, and a God peering from the heavens to police my every thought and move, ready to slap me on the hand or wag a finger at me.

I began to see God as unconditionally loving, as the Being who, having created me, was the One most intent on helping me to make my way in the world as triumphantly and with as little harm done to myself or others as possible. I had begun to change my mind.

Black women cannot afford a self-negating faith. The costs are too high.

The last chapter of my mostly forgotten doctoral dissertation is an examination of a Black female protagonist intent on changing her mind, too. Though Celie from *The Color Purple* is the best known of Alice Walker's protagonists, my favorite is the title character from Walker's 1976 novel *Meridian*. A civil rights activist suffering from PTSD—"battle fatigue," as she calls it—Meridian is skeptical of everything: herself, the revolution, the man she loves, racial leaders, the church, the future, and her place in all of it. In the epigraphic scene, her comrade and former lover Truman finds her recovering on her porch after a chaotic protest she led with some children earlier in the day. After the protest, the same thing happened that always happened after a protest: she suffered an attack of paralysis and had to be carried home to recover until she regained use of her limbs.

Truman, having heard about this, comes to visit, to urge her to stop putting herself and her body in harm's way, since her body clearly cannot sustain whatever it is she is fighting for. He sees weakness and disease, but for her, the brokenness is part of her process of coming to reckon with what it means to be a part of the revolution. She is, she tells him, "a woman in the process of changing her mind."

The scene is unsettling because the process is unruly and dangerous. In one moment, Meridian is triumphantly leading children into a makeshift museum of weird amusements so they can decide for themselves what is true. In another, beset both by the daunting nature of what she feels compelled to do and her friends' misunderstanding of it, she finds herself paralyzed.

It is not inaccurate to say that the Bible is, in many ways, a museum of weird amusements: men being swallowed by whales, children being eaten by bears, a man building a floating box to survive a flood even though he's never seen rain. Articulating what to believe after leading generation after generation into a relationship with our holy book of weird amusements should beget more questions than answers.

The process of changing your mind does not always feel as triumphant as it felt to me on the day I joined a not-Baptist church. Sometimes it can feel like bodily inertia, like trudging through sludge, like a continual anxiety attack, as you try to move through the old messages toward something new.

I have narrated leaving the Baptist church as an event, but truth be told it was the culmination of a series of events. Maybe I'd started the leaving a year earlier when, after reading a Bible study by a widely acclaimed White evangelical writer who proclaimed that we should get back to Old Testament forms of retributive justice, I took umbrage during our small-group meeting. I was admonished to have "a teachable spirit." On that day, I left small-group studies, never to return.

Or perhaps I had started the leaving two years before when, in Sunday school, I objected to the notion that Vashti disobeyed God by refusing to dance naked in a room full of drunken men at her husband's request. My insistence that my fellow class member's Bible commentary was both wrong and sexist was met with exasperated looks and sublimated eye rolls.

By the time I left, I had already been leaving for a long while, on my way to some other set of interpretations that didn't cost Black people and women so much, that did not ask us to be teachable in accepting White supremacy and sexism.

In many ways, my theology had to change because my political commitments had become clear. Believing as I did that God had ordered my path to graduate school, a place where I'd become a fiercely committed feminist and racial justice activist in tandem with my studies, I could not embrace a faith that actively worked in opposition to the life's work I had committed to—of uplifting Black people.

I could not be in a relationship with a Divine Being who insisted that my daily or hourly cataloguing of personal unworthiness was the proper pretext for a relationship. To be Black, to be a Black woman in America, is to be confronted daily with a catalogue of one's supposed inadequacy and unworthiness. I did not need my conversations with God to be a dress rehearsal for the oppression I experienced in the regular old world.

I used to shrink when I heard preachers talk about repentance. Now I'm one of them.

Surely the God I served did not participate in a White supremacist patriarchal project built on a notion of Black and female inferiority. In order to be fortified to fight back

against White supremacy and patriarchy in my outer life, I had to win the battle against these ideas in my inner life. And that meant changing my mind about who God is and how God must work. Many think it's dangerous to sublimate one's theology to one's politics or one's identity. But I realized that theology is a human project. It is meant, like Jesus said of the Sabbath, to be our servant, not our master.

When my dad invited me to trust myself, to trust my own sense of the faith community that would work best for me, even that invitation challenged my deeply ingrained orthodoxy. Very often we are taught not to trust ourselves, because "the heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Moreover, we have been taught to "lean not unto [our] own understanding" (Prov. 3:5).

We teach people to relinquish their own desires, impressions, and understandings in service of some higher power. It is true that our hearts can deceive us; true, I think, that our own understanding is limited; true, even, that we often try to make gods in our own image. But surely we deserve a theology that does not ask us to abnegate the self entirely in order to be in relationship to God. Black women cannot afford a self-negating faith. The costs are too high.

Learning to trust myself, to trust my own discernment, went against my own theological understandings, which had told me that everything I thought or felt was both potentially and probably deceitful, particularly if my thoughts did not lead toward notions of faith based on fear, sin, eternal damnation, and continual self-denial. But Black feminism taught me that Black women's ways of knowing are good, rational, and trustworthy. And if I believed that—if I believed in building a world where Black life mattered, where Black women are heard and respected—then I could not continue to practice a faith rooted in my own abjection.

So I changed my mind, or rather I recognized that my mind had changed.

During the first autumn season in pandemic quarantine, I preached my first official sermon. Ironically, it was back in a Baptist church, where I am now a member again, although thankfully in a more progressive and radical iteration. For most of my adult life, folks had been calling me a preacher, a designation I shied away from—first because of deeply ingrained sexism, and then because I did not want to be a spokesperson for the Christian project with its imperialism, sanctimony, White supremacy, and homophobia.

I continued to stay in the church long after I changed my mind about the Bible as inerrant and Jesus as the only path to God and sex as the reward of a heterosexual marriage. I did this mostly because Jesus is still Jesus, and I signed up all those years ago to follow him. But it was also because to the extent that the evils which beset us are evidence of a bankrupt spiritual condition, I still believe that religious institutions matter for the healthy functioning of American life. I believe that those of us with Christian privilege have the duty to undo the harms done to countless others in Jesus' name or to die to ourselves trying.

Confronted with the sins so endemic to Christian theology, I repented, helped along by a Black feminist framework that taught me new ways to relate to myself and emboldened me to make more demands of my own faith tradition. Determined to demand more from Christianity, to leave no stone unturned for the sake of the gospel, I made up my mind to stay. And since I have always been a loudmouth and one who believes in taking sides, I recognized the Spirit's tap on the shoulder, asking me to lend myself on occasion to being a mouthpiece for an anti-imperial, queer-affirming, anti-patriarchal, pro-Black lives gospel, meant to welcome all to the table.

For my first sermon I chose a text from Exodus 32, in which God changes God's mind about destroying the Israelites after they begin worshiping a golden calf. I had changed my mind about preaching in part because I realized that there are other stories of the gospel, and of the faith, that can be told: stories that don't demand blind allegiance, stories that invite us to ask hard questions, stories that allow us to change. In God's case, the changing of mind was more about relenting from a chosen set of outcomes than repenting from a wrong way of thinking. But if God had occasion to change God's mind, then the practice should be a part of how we think of living faithful lives, too.

In the context of organized Christian religion, repentance is mostly seen as an act of personal piety, confessing one's shortcomings on the way to repairing one's relationship with the divine. But what if, at base, our faith practices were about a willingness to change our minds in ways that allowed us to bend more easily toward love, justice, mercy, and grace? What if we modeled the notion that discipleship is about a willingness to change as we come to learn more about what it means to live in ways that are loving and just?

These are days when some folks are incredibly resistant to changing their minds, even when presented with facts. And a refusal to be swayed by evidence is a

spiritual malady, not just a behavioral failure. Repentance is a discipline through which we learn to struggle together in community and with ourselves—to argue it out, as Moses and God did on the mountain, and then to come to a conclusion that leads to as little harm to people as possible.

God changes God's mind in Exodus 32 because looking out for the people means more to God than the need to be right. So, too, repentance is about sublimating our own egoistic need to be right. But it is not just about a performance of humility; it also requires replacing the ego with a different interpretation of the world, one that considers others deeply while remembering to hold ourselves in proper esteem. When these things are in balance, then changing our minds becomes as regular as inhaling a fresh breath of air.

Perhaps this is what Octavia Butler meant when she argued that “God is change.” Yes, I hear the people of the faith saying, “God is the same, yesterday, and today, and forever.” But we are not the same. Our faith is not the same. Change is our constant companion. If indeed it is true that we must repent in order to access the kingdom of heaven, I believe Christ is asking us to be willing to be completely transformed by our commitments to love, to challenge empire, to journey with and as the least of these to a better world.

I used to shrink when I heard preachers who loved to preach about repentance. Now I think I am becoming a preacher who loves to preach about repentance, because I love the invitation to think in new ways about old problems. We cannot put new wine into old wineskins, scripture tells us. We cannot shy away from the new ways to come. Being willing to change one's mind is a fundamental Christian habit of mind, a discipline for the disciples, a space of hope for those of us whose very breath was being ripped from us under the knees of the old way of doing things.

Repentance refreshes the gospel for us, brings us into a newness of relationship to it, to the world we are trying to build. And when at once we think we have it all figured out, the God who is change invites us to think—and then to think again.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Returning to repentance.”