

Behind "repent or perish"

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Had there been a vote on the subject in my church youth group, my peers would have decided without much debate that I was the least likely person to become a pastor. Due to some kind of inverted sense of personal integrity, I rejected what I considered to be any overly pious songs—"They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love," "For Those Tears I Died"—because as an adolescent, I didn't feel particularly loving toward anybody.

I refused to sing in the choir or to participate in "rapture practice," those random moments when our youth director would yell out "rapture!" and all of the teenagers would raise their hands above their heads and shout "whooo!" as if we were being sucked up into heaven like so many dust bunnies vacuumed away from beneath the bed. My youth directors found my attitude troubling. I was uncooperative. In Bible study, I giggled during the Lazarus story ("[he stinketh](#)"). They argued that my salvation was at stake.

I never thought I would stick with Christianity because I grew up believing that Jesus' words in today's Gospel text were the summation of the Christian faith: repent or perish. Although I was told that he was loving, Christ was presented by our leaders as an angry, petty man who spoke on behalf of an even angrier God. Even as a teenager I thought, what kind of God works that way, and how could people refer to "him" as loving? If I was going to hell, I was going to do so on my own terms—because I knew that I could never be good enough to make it into heaven on my own.

My father's death changed everything. He didn't believe in the God I learned about in youth group, although he was a regular churchgoer. He believed in a God of grace, a God whose greatest joy is to welcome someone like me, a sinner. A God who delights in raising the dead from their tombs. It was at my father's deathbed that this God broke through to me. I needed to hear the immense "yes," this almost unbelievable promise, before I could hear the "no."

Now I hear Luke's words in an entirely different context. Now I know that God will risk all, and that because of this gracious God, who in Christ took on flesh and bone and adrenal glands, I will never be separated from God's love. I know that I cannot make it on my own terms, that I will fail myself and others, that we will die. I know that beneath the hard "no" of "repent or perish" is a far deeper "yes"—a yes that spans time and space, that sweetly hobbles even the hardest heart.

*Additional lectionary columns by Evensen appear in the February 23 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*