

Repentance at the heart (3B) (*Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20*)

## **There's a whole lotta repenting going on in these texts.**

by [Brian Maas](#)

January 22, 2021

*To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).*

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

"Repent!"

It's the heart of the message of John the Baptist, arrested as the passage from Mark begins.

It's the first command of Jesus' preaching as he bursts upon the stage in Galilee.

It's the implicit intention of Paul's advice to the church at Corinth.

It's the collective response of the people of Nineveh as they hear Jonah's reluctant proclamation in the streets of their city.

And it's God's response to the Ninevites' decisive reaction to that proclamation.

There's no escaping that throughout the day's texts: there's a whole lotta repenting going on.

This repentance, of course, isn't an alarmed reaction to the moralistic "turn or burn" cry of so-called evangelical preachers; it's true *metanoia*, the willing, intentional change of mind—and life—of one, or of a community, convinced that there's a better way than the path currently being traveled. Even God can have such a change of mind and change of plans.

In each instance there's a different motivation for the call to repentance and a different reason for an affirmative response. In much the same way, there will be listeners responsive to different calls to repentance and listeners whose responses will be chosen for different reasons.

Jesus' call to repentance is a direct result of "the time" being fulfilled and the reign of God drawing near. Jesus is calling his listeners to recognize the divine proximity and to believe in it enough to live a different, better life. In the case of four fishermen, the call to repentance is framed as a call to follow, a call to trade fish-fishing for people-fishing, which is its own kind of repentance. What greater change of path is there than to be pulled from the deep into the light and the air? One has to wonder whether those first four had any inkling of how similarly drastic their own experience of repentance would be—how, especially after the resurrection, they would be netted and drawn into a reality wholly unlike any they had known.

Paul echoes Jesus' conviction that the time is drawing near: the time of final judgment. His call to repentance is a call to live a life counter to the culture's everyday expectations—expectations that have changed little in two millennia. He calls the Corinthians to let their relationship to God overshadow and govern their relationships to money, to property, to one another, and to the world at large. Now as then, such a repentance leads to the new freedom, the true freedom of a life aligned with God's priorities and not the world's.

Jonah's call to repentance is a begrudging statement of truth and of its consequences—the kind of repentance it's sometimes hard for preachers to proclaim to the parishioners who provide their paychecks. Yet the Ninevites'—and some parishioners'—response in turn is that of people who hear a word they know to be the truth. We may be no more eager to proclaim repentance than Jonah was, but we shouldn't be his equals in failing to expect—or worse, in resenting—that people may actually hear and respond.

And God's repentance is a reminder of the grace that lies behind the divine desire to draw near even to us.

So repent! Repent, and believe it's good news.