

“A Forgotten Path”

Matthew 4:12-17

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Gary Walters

Jesus begins his ministry. “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he went to Galilee but instead of staying in Nazareth, Jesus moved to Capernaum. The town was beside Lake Galilee in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. So God's promise came true just as the prophet Isaiah had said. Listen lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, lands along the road to the sea and east of the Jordan, listen Galilee, land of the gentiles; although your people live in darkness, they will see a bright light and although they live in the shadow of death, a light will shine on them. Then Jesus started preaching, turn back to God, the kingdom of heaven will soon be here.” The word of God, for the people of God, thanks be to God.

As this is lent and it's a season of soul searching, if you will, we are going to talk about that last sentence. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. I think we're probably more familiar with that than the how the CEV translates, but they mean the same thing. But repentance is not a common theme in our culture anymore and since I'm a "tech guy" I was curious. I typed in on Google, and if you don't know what Google is...I can't help you...it's like the yellow pages on steroids, for the Internet. You type in search words and it gives you back responses and if you've ever paid attention it will actually tell you how many matches it will have for your search word or search words. Well, I typed in repentance and there were 6.5 million hits for repentance. That means that somewhere on that page or in the title, repentance is a key phrase or key term that the search engine latched onto. 6.5 million, that seems descent. To give something to compare it to I typed in hope, another good church word, and came up with 600 million responses, give or take a few million. Wow, 600 million, that's a bunch. But, hope its hope, you know it's a much cheerier theme and maybe we have just latched onto that so I typed in sin. Well sin also had about 600 million hits. I thought, well, we talk about sin 100:1 in relation to repentance. That's incredible. Well I typed in the word love, there were about 3.5 billion hits for love. Well that kind of puts it in perspective, doesn't it. In fact, when you think that there is over 7 million new pages added to the Internet every single day, every single day, that's right, 6.5 million hits for repentance sounds pretty small.

But, it shouldn't surprise us, we live in a culture that has sterilized sin. It's been run through the clinical filter. Sin is no longer sin, its maladjustment, or its deviant behavior, or its bad upbringing, or poor family dynamics, or who knows what. So in a culture where sin is no longer sin, is it surprising that repentance has fallen by the

wayside. And, yet, the prophets come proclaiming it. John comes preparing for Jesus, proclaiming this message, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and Jesus starts his ministry with these very same words, and for good reason. And yet, that reason that we seem to have lost track of.

Repentance literally means to change direction. So, you're heading one direction and you make a 180 and turn the other way. I have preached before that it's direction not distance that separates us from God. The whole idea being that, for one thing, God is everywhere, but we can make choices that point us away from a godly direction and the wholeness of God. Just the illustration, assuming I'm not wearing a head microphone, if I turn away from you, you can't hear me and it's harder to maintain a relationship. The same is true with God. If we are making those decisions that are taking us away from him, we are harming the relationship and our lives might look pretty good, distancewise, we might be pretty close, but if we are heading away, eventually our lives will resemble that godly pattern less and less. But, God is no farther than our turning, or repenting, turning towards him, that's repentance.

That's all good and well, the problem is that it can be pretty hard to change direction. Flight 3407 has made the headlines in recent weeks. That was the plane that crashed into the suburbs of Buffalo, New York. They are still sifting through the wreckage and trying to figure out exactly what happened and they haven't made any conclusions, but one thing that is becoming fairly clear, is that the pilot was fighting with his auto pilot as that plane slammed into the ground. In fact, the airplane, guided by the auto pilot, was in a straight nosedive. Now auto pilot is normally a pretty great thing. The pilot's get the plane off the ground, they hit auto pilot, and it gets them pretty close, they flip it off before they land but usually it does the guiding for them, and it does a pretty good job. But in this case the programming inside the auto pilot thought that the plane needed more speed and so it put the nose down, even though they were only 1600 feet off the ground. There wasn't enough room. And, so the pilot, in that split second forgot to, or didn't get a chance to flip off that auto pilot and he could not fight hard enough, he couldn't fight strong enough to override those automatic controls. The pilot and his crew and the passengers, all 47 of them, lost their lives, as that plane plunged straight into the ground.

You and I have an auto pilot and usually it's a pretty good thing. If you're questioning "Do I really have an auto pilot?", think of it this way, 80 to 90% of the decisions you make in the course of a day you actually don't even make. They are just habit or rote, you just do them automatically. If you need anymore proof, look at where you're sitting. Chances are that most of you are within a couple feet of where you were sitting the last time you were here, because we are creatures of habit. Normally it's a good thing. If we had to consciously make every single decision, or choice that comes before

us in a day, we would wear out our poor little brains. Well, my poor little brain anyway, and so we just do these things out of habit. The problem is that when there are habits or patterns that we keep repeating that are destructive or sinful, they can be extremely hard to break. Extremely hard to break!

But, the prophets in John and Jesus give us the clue, the key, right here. The key to breaking those habits is repentance. We need to remember, we need to find once again this forgotten path. This way that although it might be out of step with our culture, it is very much in step for us as Christians. It's very much in step for God, as he seeks to draw us closer to himself.

It's helpful to know what your being saved from, right? I don't know if we need to illustrate this but it's worth mentioning that before we know what it is to be found we should talk a little bit about what it is to be lost. It's that image of the nosedive. Our direction in life can take us there in a hurry sometimes. Other times it's more of a midcourse correction in terms of where we are at and the direction we are heading. Think about these categories for just a second in terms of where they are taking you, where your auto pilot is going. If you run to its natural conclusion, or take out to its natural conclusion, the decisions you are making about how you spend your time right now, where will you end up. If you take your natural conclusion to their current ending, their current direction, what you are doing with your money, where will you end up. If you apply those same questions to your relationships, to the way you deal with your spouse or your children or your co-workers, or your church members, the world, where will you end up? Where is that auto pilot taking you? It's worth asking the question because we want to make corrections before the nose is hitting the ground. We want to make corrections before it's too late. Not just because we want to avoid the consequences of our actions, but because we recognize before God the tragedy of how we too easily misuse the freedom that he has given us. Ultimately all sin is before God, because it is God who has given us the freedom to choose and to do what is right but in giving us the freedom to do what is right, we also have the freedom to do what is wrong. It's an incredible gift that God has given us. In his power and wisdom he could have determined it all but he said, no, I'll make them in my image. I'll make them like God, that they might choose the right as well as the wrong.

If life feels, as I have heard American life described at times, tired, harassed, and broken, we need to question the direction we are going. In scripture, when Jesus, when God describes the life that we receive in him, he doesn't describe it as tired, harassed or broken, he describes it as being delivered from bondage, being brought into the light, giving freedom, being rescued from death, having a new lease on life, everything reclaimed by God is abundant life, eternal life, life in the spirit, life to its fullest and that is how life was meant to be. And yet, too often we experience anything but that

fullness of life, because of the choices we have made and those choices have become habits and those habits will determine our direction, our destiny, unless there is some midcourse correction.

The challenge is before us, to check our auto pilot, to seek God now, before it's too late, before we are in dire straights, to recognize what our sin is and call it sin. And to repent of that, that God can unlock his power to help us make the changes we need to make in order to set our direction for him, or as Pastor Art said on Wednesday, that we may clean the pipes and open the flow of God's spirit into our lives. That we might find this forgotten path, that God can draw us closer to himself. Take this opportunity, this Lenten season, but this worship service, this alter is always open and you're invited. As the interpretive worship choir ministers to us you can come up, if you are so moved, in order that God might challenge and comfort and correct you, and where you are heading in your life. You're invited now to the alter of God, let us pray.

Lord help us to deal honestly with ourselves, that we might turn our faces toward you as you lead us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.