

“Repentance is Radical”
Isaiah Chapter 31
Sunday, December 18th, 2022

Jock was a painter by trade. He often would thin his paint so it would go further. So when the Church decided to do some deferred maintenance on the building, Jock put in the low bid, and got the job. As he always did, he thinned his paint way down with turpentine.

One day while he was up on scaffolding -- the job almost finished -- Jock heard a horrendous clap of thunder, and the sky opened above him. A downpour of rain washed the thinned paint off the church and knocked Jock off his scaffold and onto the lawn among the gravestones and puddles of thinned and worthless paint.

Jock thought this to be a warning from the Almighty, so he got on his knees and cried: “Oh, God! Forgive me! What should I do?”

A loud voice thundered, “REPAINT! REPAINT! AND THIN NO MORE!”

Repentance is the theological doctrine before us today. We’ve made it to **Chapter 31** of the Old Testament book of Isaiah in our sermon series through Isaiah I’ve titled, “The Holy One of Israel.” That descriptor (title?) is found 32 times in the Bible (none in the New Testament), and 25 of those 32 times God is identified as “the Holy One of Israel” in the Book of Isaiah. Before we read today’s text, it would be good for us to be on the same page regarding the meaning of repentance.

The *First Catechism* - which I’m hopeful parents & grandparents use to teach bible doctrine to their children and grandchildren - helps us define repentance in questions 58, 59, and 62:

Question 58 - *What must you do to be saved?* I must repent of my sin and believe in Christ as my Savior.

Question 59 - *How do you repent of your sin?* I must be sorry for my sin, and hate and forsake it. “Forsake” means to “abandon.”

Question 62 - *Can you repent and believe in Christ by your own power?* No. I cannot repent and believe unless the Holy Spirit changes my heart. So, repentance is ‘sincere regret’ - it is remorse over one’s sin, so deep it is to be hated and abandoned.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (WSC) defines repentance as “a saving grace, by which a sinner, being truly aware of his sinfulness, understands the mercy of God in Christ, grieves for and hates his sins, and turns from them to God, fully intending and striving for a new obedience.” (Q. 87, found in *Trinity Hymnal* on page 875).

Repentance is featured in today’s sermon text. We do eternally well to become a people of continual repentance. Repentance is not merely a one time decision or act - it is a lifestyle

Isaiah 31:1-9:

“Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, *and* rely on horses, who trust in chariots because *they are* many, and in horsemen because they are very strong, but who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the Lord!

2 - Yet He also *is* wise and will bring disaster, and will not call back His words, but will arise against the house of evildoers, and against the help of those who work iniquity.

3 - Now the Egyptians *are* men, and not God; and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out His hand, both he who helps will fall, and he who is helped will fall down; they all will perish together.

4 - For thus the Lord has spoken to me: “As a lion roars, and a young lion over his prey (When a multitude of shepherds is summoned against him, *he* will not be afraid of their voice nor be disturbed by their noise), so the Lord of hosts will come down to fight for Mount Zion and for its hill.

5 - Like birds flying about, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem. Defending, He will also deliver *it*; passing over, He will preserve *it*.”

6 - Return *to Him* against whom the children of Israel have deeply revolted.

7 - For in that day every man shall throw away his idols of silver and his idols of gold—sin, which your own hands have made for yourselves.

8 - Then Assyria shall fall by a sword not of man, and a sword not of mankind shall devour Him. But he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall become forced labor.

9 - He shall cross over to his stronghold for fear, and his princes shall be afraid of the banner,” Says the Lord, whose fire *is* in Zion and whose furnace *is* in Jerusalem.”

MP 1 - The Sin (v. 1, 3a, 7)

MP 2 - The Solution (v. 6) (Repent!)

Verse 1 and 3a pinpoint Judah’s sin. Verse 1 again - “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, *and* rely on horses, who trust in chariots because *they are* many, and in horsemen because they are very strong, but who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the Lord!” For the Jews, “going **down** to Egypt” was the opposite of going **up** to worship God in Zion. The Psalmist in **Psalms 20** records an interesting take on this when we read, “Some *trust* in chariots, and some in horses; but we (the covenant remnant of Judah) will remember the name of the Lord our God.”

The Jews were not to make any kind of an alliance with Egypt. That much is clear from **Deuteronomy 17:16**, “But he shall not cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall not return that way again.’”

That aside, verse 1 zeroes in on Judah’s sin. **The Jews didn’t trust God; rather, they put their trust in man** - Egypt specifically - to protect them from Assyria. But, that applies to more than the conflict between Judah and the Assyrians. The Jews had chosen to trust the creation rather than the Creator. And, we do a similar thing, when we entrust our troubled minds, bruised emotions, and scarred intellects to secular professionals who do not use God’s Word in the therapy process. How helpful that can be for someone looking for help in all the wrong places! Verse 3a (first half of verse 3) teaches, “...the Egyptians *are* men, and not God; and their horses are flesh, and not spirit.”

For the Jews to trust in anything other than God for their salvation was to despise the power and goodness of their Lord. To rely on Egypt, to lean on it for support, was to spurn the assistance God alone could provide.

Verse 7 walks this back one full step; trusting in the untrustworthy Egyptians isn't the only thing Judah did incorrectly; her people also clung to the safety of their idols. Idols are those things (or people) that are more important to us than God. The crazy thing is they made these idols with their own hands - they were lifeless and pointless. They couldn't do one thing, let alone deliver people from real crises. But familiarity with their idols made them feel comfortable to rely upon. They did not forsake their idols.

Pastor and former zoo keeper Gary Richmond gained an interesting perspective on snakes while working with a snake handler in a zoo. Richmond and four others milked the venom of a King Cobra. This was an extremely dangerous task as the King Cobra has enough venom to kill hundreds of adults.

An entire roll of paper towels was pushed into the cobra's open mouth which then promptly closed. Once the paper towels were saturated with the lethal venom and they were ready to release the snake, the curator gave an important warning: "More people are bitten trying to let go of snakes than when they grab them." If the cobra was not released properly, it could turn and bite its captors.

Many people claim to repent of sin, but they do not forsake it. That is like letting go of the cobra's head, but not its tail.

The solution to sin, at least in this case, is found in verse 6 - "Return to Him (God, the Holy One of Israel) against whom the children of Israel have deeply revolted."

"Revolting deeply, Judah's idolatry had taken hold long before the alliance with Egypt was conceived. It was, we may say, the cancer which lay at the root of all the nation's ills, for it showed that the Lord no longer had his people's undivided loyalty. It is natural, therefore, that in calling for radical repentance, Isaiah should again point to the casting away of idols as the evidence that will confirm it." (Webb, 133)

"Repentance is radical. It is not just giving up this or that sin, but a complete turnabout in our stance towards God, and it goes right to the root of our sinfulness. As for the prodigal son (**Luke Chapter 15**), it is a recognition that we are rebels, and a return to the One we have so deeply offended (verse 6). Its consequences, too, are radical; all other gods have to go (verse 7) in order to clear the way for the full enjoyment of God's blessing (verse 8 & 9). (Webb, 133)

"Return" (the first word in verse 6) means there has to be a genuine change of heart. 'Return' is the standard spiritual metaphor for repentance based on going back to a position previously occupied.

Bringing this home to our hearts, it's not the big occasions (our Assyria's) that defeat us. It is the small daily decisions. The silly-sounding decision whether to get out of bed

to read our Bibles and seek our Savior, or to have another 20 minutes under the blankets. *Do we fill our eyes with God before the world gets our attention? Do we sit in His presence and commit ourselves to holiness for the day ahead, winning the battle before we reach the battlefield?*

Paul Harvey tells the story about a family on Christmas Eve. This family had a tradition where the Mother and children would go to the Christmas Eve service, and the Father would stay home and read the paper. When the family returns home from church, they would all gather to open up their presents.

The Father was not an evil man, but he just couldn't believe in the childhood stories anymore of God coming as a baby in a manger. As the family left for church, he opened up the evening paper and began to read by the fireplace.

He heard a tapping on the window. It was a bird flying against the glass of his window trying to get out of the snow into the warmth of his home. The man had compassion on the bird, and he went outside, hoping to bring it in.

As he approached the bird, the bird just flew against the window even harder. Pretty soon, the bird flew into the bushes below the window, half frozen, yet too afraid to be caught by this huge man. The more the man tried to reach for the bird, the more the bird flew frantically into the snow and thorns of the bushes.

After a few minutes in the cold and seeing the bird continue to injure itself, the man yelled out in frustration, "Stupid bird, can't you understand that I'm trying to help?" The man paused and thought, "If only you understood you wouldn't fly away ... if only ... if only I could become a bird, and get you to understand."

Just then, the church bells rang, as they always have on the hour. But when the man heard the bells this time, he fell to his knees and began to cry, saying, "Oh, God, I didn't understand. Oh, God, I didn't understand." He repented of, turned away from, and abandoned His sins, becoming God's child by faith in Jesus Christ.

God's Son came in human form that we might understand from where we have come, for what reason we were separated and how we could be restored to God.