

CONCORDIA SEMINARY, ST. LOUIS



honest repentance

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Concordia
Seminary
ST. LOUIS

HONEST REPENTANCE

Introduction

This series consists of six doctrinal sermons exploring the nature of repentance, designed to be preached during mid-week Lenten services. By doctrinal sermon, I mean a sermon that employs the themes and imagery of a biblical text to elucidate a doctrinal topic. This approach employs a somewhat freer use of the biblical material than our modern way of doing exegesis, since it does not focus exclusively on the original intent of the author in the text's original context. Instead, it explores the resonances of the biblical text with other parts of Scripture and with Lutheran doctrine in order to sketch a picture of what repentance looks like in the Christian life.

Repentance starts with being honest before God and ourselves about who we are. When it comes to sin, everyone has a natural impulse to hide, but repentance means finding the courage to be honest. It also means having faith in the promise of forgiveness. But being honest about faith means recognizing that faith is contested on many sides not only by society, but by our own experiences, and sometimes even by the actions of God himself. Finally, repentance means becoming more human, not less. Because our thoughts, desires, and actions are so linked with sin, it is easy to view repentance as fighting against our humanity as if holiness meant trying to stifle as many of our natural human impulses as possible. But honest repentance recognizes that sin is the thing that stifles our humanity, while repentance results in our natural impulses functioning more as God designed them.

Though not cited explicitly in the sermons, the key texts from the Lutheran Confessions that stand in the background are the following. First, the definition of repentance as contrition and faith is found in article 12 of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. The practice of repentance is described as the daily use of baptism in the fourth question on baptism in the Small Catechism. There Luther says that we use our baptism by “daily contrition and repentance.” Finally, the nature of original sin is described in article 1 of the Formula of Concord, where it states that sin is an accident, not a substance. These are the doctrinal points that are fleshed out in a narrative way with scriptural imagery in the sermons.

In order to explore the themes described above, I have chosen some of the readings that are assigned for the Easter Vigil. In the context of the Easter Vigil, these readings capture the broad sweep of God's saving acts in the Bible, culminating in baptism, which traditionally takes place at the vigil. That makes the readings good candidates for exploring the Christian use of baptism through “daily contrition and repentance,” as the Small Catechism puts it.

Some of the readings are quite long, so I have listed them here along with an alternate shorter reading that corresponds with the content of the sermons.

1. Law (Creation: Genesis 1:1-2:3 or Genesis 1:1-10)
2. Chaos (The Flood: Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13 or Genesis 7:6-12, 17-21; 8:1)
3. Faith (Abraham and Isaac: Genesis 22:1-18)
4. Repentance (The Repentance of Nineveh: Jonah 3:1-10)
5. Purification (The Three Men in the Fiery Furnace: Daniel 3:1-30 or Daniel 3:13-30)
6. Salvation (The Crossing of the Red Sea: Exodus 14:10-15:1)

SERMON 1: LAW

Genesis 1:1-2:3 or Genesis 1:1-10

Mark Twain once saw a man shot in the street. It gave him bad dreams. He says that he dreamt over and over again that some idiot had put a large family Bible on the old man's chest to help him, but it only made it harder for him as he labored to breathe. Twain then remarks, "In my nightmares, I gasped and struggled for breath under the crush of that vast book for many a night."¹

As we enter a season of repentance, we need first to come to terms with what we think of the Bible, particularly of God's law. If we think of a Bible as a book of arbitrary rules and boundaries that systematically restricts our humanity, crushing the life out of us like an anvil on our chest, then it's going to be really hard to engage in anything like repentance. If we are honest with ourselves, we'd end up with resentment, more likely. Sure, we can try to act like good Christians and conform externally to the demands of God's law, but if we are not convinced in our hearts that this way of life is what humans look like when we are thriving, then we run the risk of accumulating bitterness and resentment over time. At some point, we may even ask ourselves, "Was it worth it?"

But the creation account in Genesis 1 encourages us to think of God's law not as a heavy burden, but as a set of boundaries that open up space for life to flourish. Take day two of creation, for example. God separates the waters from the waters. He installs the sky to keep the waters above away from the waters below. This space is where life flourishes. As the account continues, God fills the space with land, with plants, with fish and birds and land animals, and finally with Adam and Eve. If God had not established the boundary, then we would have nothing but watery chaos. Maybe the fish would be ok, but the rest of us wouldn't have a chance.

¹ Harriet Elinor Smith ed., *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 158.

Since we are created in the image of God, we imitate this boundary making activity in many aspects of our lives. We build houses, which are like little artificial skies that keep the waters away from us. We clean those houses, which is another way we try to impose order on our environments and keep chaos at bay so that we can have a space to live. And likewise, the rules we impose are, hopefully, designed to keep danger and chaos at a minimum. “Don’t play in the street.” That’s not an arbitrary exercise of capricious parental power. It’s meant to keep our children safe.

God’s laws are precisely this kind of boundary. The fifth commandment, for example, “You shall not murder,” sets a boundary on human behavior that prevents chaos in society. If you remove that rule from human consciences and societies, what would daily life be like? You would have to be suspicious of every stranger. You would have to be on your guard at all times, ready to fight or flee. You could have no pleasant interactions outside your immediate family. If you step out into the world, you step into a chaos that would exhaust and overwhelm you.

Or to return to the example of our houses, what would happen if we took the view that the structure of our houses is arbitrary and overly restrictive? I don’t like the fact that my kitchen window separates me from the outdoors, so I break it! I don’t like the fact that a wall in my house prevents me from going where I want to go, so I knock it down. That went pretty well, so I will take out another wall. Oops, that one was load bearing. Pretty soon the rain is pouring in, and I am sitting in a pile of rubble.

The ashes on Ash Wednesday are a sign that we as the human race have wrecked our homes. God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his face the breath of life. But when Adam and Eve broke God’s command, God pronounced the curse, “Dust you are, and to dust you will return.” He reversed the original creation by taking back the breath of life and leaving Adam to revert to the earth from which he was taken. It’s a kind of poetic justice. “You don’t like the way I put you together? Then I will take you apart.” And that is the situation of every one of us. Our bodies are the houses that we destroy because of sin. The ashes remind us that we all labor under that curse that turns us into rubble.

There are some sins for which the rubble is obvious. An addict, for example, most likely knows that he is ruining his own life, even if he can’t find the strength to break free on his own. But more likely, sin is more subtle than this. We have to listen to the hints that life gives us, hints that something is not right.

From the outside, John looked like he had the perfect life. He was married with two kids. He had a good job and a spacious home. Everything was going his way. But none of these things filled the emptiness and vague sense of longing that he had. It was as if he had some sort of wound in the core of his being. He lived, in Thoreau’s words, a “life of quiet desperation.”

A sense of emptiness is a hint that all is not well. It is a hint that our decisions and our achievements have pulled us out of step with the way that God designed the universe, and us.

Honest repentance is coming to terms with those things that pull us out of step with God. It means admitting that we have done this, that we are like this, and it means desiring to put that away and to live more and more in the space where life can flourish.

But this is a really big problem to grapple with, and we don't have the resources to fill our own emptiness, much less to overcome death and condemnation. So, as we approach Easter, we also recall that our Savior talks about a house. Not just a house, a temple. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it" (Jn 2:19). The temple he was referring to was not the temple in Jerusalem, but the temple of his body. He took our place under the ancient curse and allowed his own body to return to dust. Well, not quite all the way to dust. On the third day he raised it and restored life and immortality to the human race.

As we wait for that day, it is this hope that makes honest repentance possible.

SERMON 2: CHAOS

Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13

On Good Friday in 1964, a massive earthquake occurred off the coast of Resurrection Bay in Alaska. Eyewitnesses as far away as the town of Seaside, Oregon report that the water along the coast was first sucked out to sea, exposing the mud at the bottom of the Necanicum River and creating a trough 1200 yards west of the beach.² The water level beyond the trough rose, until finally it all came rushing back in to devastate the town. Water is one of the most destructive forces on earth.

From the very first pages of Genesis, God deployed his word in a battle with water. There was a watery chaos that smothered any possibility of life until God divided it by his word. He fixed the firmament to keep the waters above separated from the waters below to open up a space in which life could dwell. With those boundaries in place the water that did exist in the Garden was a cool, life-giving mist—no longer the destructive watery chaos.

After the fall, the waters take on an even more ominous tone. When God saw human wickedness increase in exponential proportions, he removed the boundaries of the waters. For forty days, the water came not only from above but also from the fountains of the great deep below. The separation that God had effected in day two of creation collapsed and the waters came rushing back in to destroy life, except for Noah and his family and the animals on the ark. The sea was no longer merely the force of chaos, but an instrument of God's own wrath and his judgment against sin.

And yet when St. Peter reflects on Noah, he says that Noah was saved by the waters. The

² https://nctr.pmel.noaa.gov/education/science/docs/tsun2975/tsun2975_appendixC.pdf

instrument of God's judgment at the same time became the means of salvation for Noah and he floated on top of the waters in the ark that God told him to build.

The sea next figures prominently in the history of God's people as Moses was leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Pursued by Pharaoh, the children of Israel encountered an enemy even more ferocious: the sea. They were trapped. They could not go backwards because they would impale themselves on Pharaoh's swords. They could not go forwards because there they would meet a watery grave. But once again God separated the waters from the waters. The Israelites went through the middle of the sea on dry ground. In the beginning, God had opened up a space where human life could flourish, and now he opens up a space where the Israelites could escape.

Not so for the Egyptians. When the Egyptians followed the Israelites into the sea, God took away the boundaries separating the waters from the waters. The sea rushed in and swept away their chariots and drowned the Egyptians. Miriam sang this song: "I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and the rider he has thrown into the sea." For the Egyptians, the sea was divine wrath, but for the Israelites, it was God's salvation.

Jesus battled the sea with his word in his earthly ministry as well. One day he was asleep in the back of a boat, and a storm arose on the sea and threatened to destroy the disciples. But Jesus said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" and there was a great calm (Mk 4:39).

And in Revelation, God overcomes the sea. Before his throne is a sea of glass. No more chaos and death. It is completely smooth. Until finally in the new heaven and the new earth, the sea "is no more" (Rv 21:1). This represents the final triumph of God's word over the watery chaos.

Now you might think that a Christian is immune from this chaos, but not so! Think of your baptism. The Small Catechism tells us that baptism is water combined with God's word. In your baptism God throws you directly into that primeval battle recorded in the first pages of Genesis. So, it's no surprise that the Christian life is a struggle!

Don't be deceived about the Christian life. It's not "nice." When you look around you at the other people in this room, you might be tempted to think that everyone else has it all together, and you are the only one who is a mess. But what do you think the church is? Is it a calm place, full of light, in which we gather together in an orderly fashion at an appointed time to hear a few polished words of fine rhetoric? Are you supposed to nod in pious agreement with the words of the preacher and say to yourself, "How nice"?

We are baptized! That means we are all in the fight of our lives! So, of course you are overwhelmed by chaos. That's the struggle. I'm not talking just about superficial sins like you get angry with someone who steps on your foot, or you drive 40 miles an hour in a 35 mile an hour zone. (I suppose that's a sin against the fourth commandment). No, I mean your life isn't turning out the way you want it to. Maybe you lost your parents and when other people

haven't. Or you're single and you don't see how you will ever be married. Or you don't think God could possibly love you. Or you have doubts because Christianity just seems implausible after all that you have been through. You're left out. Maybe the Christian life is full or at least livable for the other nice people who have their lives put together, but you will never thrive.

Don't fall for it. These attacks do not define you. What you are seeing here is microcosm of what is playing out in the pages of Genesis. You look at that story to understand what is happening to you. These attacks are images of the primal forces that are in play at creation itself. Whether it's chaos or God's own wrath, it's not always easy to tell. This is the watery chaos that suffocates life. But the catechism tells us that baptism is not just the water, but it's also God's word. God's word separates the waters from the waters and opens up a space where life can thrive. It divides the sea and lets the Israelites pass through on dry ground. You can fight this battle and you can win because you have the word of God at whose rebuke the waters fled and which set a "boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth" (Ps 104).

In this season of repentance, we acknowledge that we have been overwhelmed by the forces of sin and evil in our lives, but we also acknowledge that we have God's word, which is powerful to tear apart those forces. As the Psalmist says, "The waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. We will not fear though the earth gives way, and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea." (Ps 46).

SERMON 3: FAITH

Genesis 22:1-18

God tells Abraham to kill his only son, and he is willing to go through with it. Somehow this is a picture of faith. But if this is what faith is, do you really want it?

We might try to console ourselves with the thought that everything turned out all right in the end. God really didn't make Abraham go through with it. Instead, he provided a ram for the sacrifice, which makes us think forward in time to the sacrifice of Christ, where God really did offer up his only Son.

But how could God even ask this of him in the first place? The question becomes even more pointed when you realize that this is not just any example of faith in the Bible, it is *the* example of faith in the Bible. When Paul wants to provide the definitive example of justification in Romans 4, he turns to the story of Abraham where God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:3, citing Gn 15:6). Abraham believed

God's promise, and God considered Abraham's faith to be righteousness. Following St. Paul, Lutherans call this "justification," and we hold that we are justified by faith alone. The fact that Abraham actually did offer his son is then cited as proof of his faith by James and Hebrews. So, we cannot get around this text. This incident is at the very heart of the Lutheran understanding of salvation.

To make matters worse, God is not just asking Abraham to kill his son, but to kill the one through whom all nations would be blessed and through whom his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. So, the order to sacrifice Isaac is not only a catastrophic event in Abraham's family, but it also has the potential to be a catastrophic event for the whole world. God's test not only contradicts Abraham's natural affection for his son, but it contradicts God's own promise! Jesus was going to be born from Isaac's line, so God is telling Abraham to wipe out all hope for humanity. It's as if God had commanded Mary to smother Jesus in his crib.

In the face of all this, how does Abraham react? What does he feel? The astonishing thing about the text is that it doesn't tell us. Abraham is silent. He does not tell Sarah what he is planning. He does not tell Isaac what he is about to do. He does not tell the two servants his plans. He says nothing at all to anyone about what is going on. How does he feel about destroying his family, destroying his marriage, and destroying the one hope for the human race? He doesn't say.

Perhaps Abraham hates God for putting him through this. Why would God mock him by giving him a promise and then taking it away like this? Perhaps what he wanted to do was tell God, No! You can't have my son. Take me instead! And plunge the knife into his own chest. That would show God what a monstrous command this is! But whatever bitterness may have been roiling in Abraham's heart did not win the day. The promise turned out to be stronger than the bitterness.

Perhaps Abraham was filled with resignation. Perhaps he thought he would go through with it and then return to Sarah a broken man. At the age of 100, he was young enough to want to be a father, but no more. Once he has done this, he will resign himself to the fact that life has passed him by. He will give up hope. But the promise turned out to be stronger than the despair.

Perhaps he was filled with anxiety. What will happen to him afterward? Will he be branded a murderer and expelled from all human community? How could his wife Sarah still live with him after he does something like this? How could he live with himself? But the promise turned out to be stronger than the guilt and fear.³

No matter what painful emotions he experienced, whether these or others that we can't even imagine, the book of Hebrews tells us that Abraham was willing to go through with it because "he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead" (Heb 11:19).

³ These speculations about Abraham's reactions are inspired by Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton University Press, 1954), 26–37.