

Sermon for October 30, 2016 (BAMF)

“Recalculating!” Listening to the word “Repent!”

Scriptures:

Matthew 3:1-3; 4:12-17

Genesis 6:5-8

Joel 2:12-14

Ruth and I are traveling we often use GPS to give us directions to get to the specific of the place we are visiting. Sometimes the voice from the GPS interrupts our travel with the single word, “Recalculating.” When that happens, we have a choice to make: do we turn back to get on the planned GPS route or do we proceed on our way and let the GPS adjust to our choice. When we know confidently the route to our destination, we may deviate from what our GPS is telling us. But when we are less sure of ourselves, we know that we need to take corrective measures to get back on the preferred route. “Recalculating” tells us that we need to assess where we are and how we are going to go.

Recalculating! If we speaking the *koine*, common Greek of the New Testament, we would use the word, “*metanoia*, repent”— meaning “to change our minds and our course of action.” Today I want us to listen to the Biblical descriptions of “repenting” and then to consider what it means for us today to **repent, recalculate**, along those same lines.

The Greek word “repent,” *metanoia*, means “to change one’s mind and one’s course of action.” This connotation of “repent,” however, does not quite fit with how we today usually talk about “repenting.” When we talk about “repenting,” we usually focus on the connotation of “being sorry, being regretful, having remorse” over what we have done. Repentance for us is closely tied with guilt and even shame. Repentance means that we acknowledge the mistake we have made and show proper remorse—perhaps even we will “do penance” and attempt to “make things right.”

In our gospel readings today, we have heard very clearly the Biblical call for repentance, in short summaries of the preaching of both John the Baptist and Jesus himself. The message of these two men as reported by Matthew is exactly the same: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.” (Matthew 3:1 and 4:17, *Jerusalem Bible*).

Biblical “repentance,” a profound change in the way we think and act, in the way we see ourselves and perceive the world, means that we adopt a totally different mindset from what we had previously. It means that we experience a complete “paradigm shift” in the way we live and talk, the way we think and relate to each other, and the way we relate to the material world in which we live.

One of the Hebrew words for “repent” is *naham*, “to regret.” Interestingly, however, in the Old Testament we find that it is God who most frequently is said to “repent.” In the time of Noah (Genesis 6:1ff) God “repents,” seeing that the “world is filled with violence,” and that “every thought of humans was only evil continually.” How can God keep doing the same thing when faced with the pervasive dilemma of violence and evil?

Again, at Sinai, God's initial response to Israel's idolatry around the golden calf is to destroy the people, yet when Moses calls on God to "repent" (Exodus 32:12) God responds by "repenting" (Exodus 32:14) from the punishment that he had declared upon the idol-worshipping Israelites.

Much later in the story of Jonah, God "repents" of the destruction that Jonah had unequivocally declared upon Nineveh (Jonah 3:9, 10), to which Jonah explains why he initially refused to go to Nineveh: Jonah knew that God would "repent" of the destruction that Jonah was sent to proclaim against Nineveh (Jonah 4:2).

"Repenting" in each of these situations is more than just "being sorry and regretting." The "repenting" that God does means a "change in plans."

In the New Testament, "repentance" as *metanoia* continues this trajectory. Repenting brings about a complete change in plans, resulting in a transformation of our lives. Jesus and John the Baptist before him call us to completely reorient our lives to the "kingdom of God," or what Matthew calls "the kingdom of heaven."

I am deeply indebted to Walter Brueggeman's insights and analysis that he gives in his profound little book *The Prophetic Imagination*. In this seminal little book, he describes two different mindsets that shape and give form to the world in which we live. One might be called the "kingdom of heaven" mindset, and the other might be called the "kingdom of Pharaoh" mindset. He calls these two alternative ways of living "the royal consciousness" and the "prophetic consciousness." Even though he labels each of these systems a "consciousness," he notes that these respective systems are almost "unconscious," they are simply the way in which persons in those worlds live their lives, as though these were the obvious and natural ways to perceive reality and to shape our lives. These respective worlds are simply the "water that we swim in."

Metanoia moves us out of one system—the imperial way, the kingdom of Pharaoh, the royal consciousness—and into another system—the prophetic way, the "kingdom of heaven way," the prophetic consciousness. Those two alternative mindsets have been present in culture for as long as humans have lived together. Each mindset is a complete system, a culture with three aspects that mutually support each other. These three aspects are 1) "economics"—how we perceive and use the material world; 2) "politics," or social structure—how we see human relationships to be organized; 3) "religion"—how we talk about "ultimate realities" that provide the rationale for our system, our way of life.

Let me describe the dominant mindset: the royal, imperial way. With this mindset we have, first of all, the "economics of abundance." With this mindset we practice and assume the ways of accumulation. We treat the material world as if it is here for our benefit. The more stuff we have the better: more money, more property, more food, more skill, more technology, more production. Within this mindset the emphasis is on accumulation of all of these things. Furthermore this mindset also sees faster, stronger, and bigger as properties that we want in the products of our world. This mindset acknowledges that the presence of less, weaker, slower, smaller, older is real, and yet these qualities are undesirable, inferior, and to be avoided whenever possible. This mindset sees the world as an "upper class" and "lower class," based on both economics and influence.

Second, with royal, "kingdom-of-Pharaoh" mindset we value those of our relationships and social structures that encourage, enhance, and bless those who exert

power and control. Brueggeman calls this the “politics of power.” This is a vertical mindset: there is always a “top dog,” an “Over” to go with an “underdog,” an “Under.” In this mindset, being able to control and to exert influence is important and desirable. This is a mindset in which we value status and desire, being in positions of power. This mindset celebrates “being Number One,” and having the ability and position to make sure that things “go our way.” In this mindset I want to have power and keep it for myself in ways that enhance and bless me. Hierarchy is something we inherently value and try to preserve—at least when we are on top in the relationship. But this hierarchy also assumes that there are others (the “underdogs”) who are inferior and in some way at the mercy of those in control (the “top dogs”).

Third, within the royal mindset there is the logic or theology that God is on “Our Side,” that is, on the side of those who are in power and who are “on top.” In this mindset, God chooses “us,” and God opposes “them.” This is the God who blesses those who are on God’s side and opposes and punishes those who are “evil.” The sign that God is on our side is seen by the blessings of affluence, influence and control that come to those whom God has chosen. This theology has “God-with-us, and Not-with-them.”

This is the mindset of empire: Pharaoh and Caesar, the Spanish empire of the 16th and 17th centuries, British empire of the 19th century, and the empires of the Carnegies and Rockefellers that are still dominant in the USA at the present. This is the water in which we swim. It seems so natural and obvious that it is hard to imagine any other system that might really work. It is so powerful that we easily view any other mindset as misguided and unrealistic.

Yet the Biblical mindset is continually presenting us with a totally different mindset. To live within the alternative and subversive “kingdom-of-heaven” mindset we must first of all, “Recalculate!” It is not possible to simply adjust the royal mindset to include the prophetic mindset. This “kingdom-of-God” mindset is not about the afterlife and what we usually think of as “heaven.” It is about “knowing and doing God’s will here on earth,” as it fulfills God’s deepest desires for the earth.

Jesus calls, “Recalculate!” This means recalculate everything. We recalculate the way we think about the “stuff” of the world, our resources and our goods, the “stuff” we claim to own and desire. We recalculate the way that we view all persons, including the way we relate to each other and the “outsider.” We also recalculate the way that we see and talk about God’s desires for our world. We recalculate (and recalibrate) the things we hope to achieve. We recalculate what holds our attention, and we notice what distracts us from this mindset; these distractions become our “idols.”

Jesus—all of Jesus’ life and teaching—is the high-definition picture of this prophetic mindset. Jesus lives this mindset; he describes this mindset in his parables, instructions, and teachings; he invites his followers with the words, “Learn from me.” The alternative mindset, that Jesus is describing and that comes from the prophetic tradition of Israel, is a mindset that embodies the “economics of enough-ness”—there is manna and daily bread for everyone; the “politics of mutuality”—right relationship is the goal in which everyone benefits and all persons will receive what they need; and the “religion of God’s freedom”—in which God is continually doing “something new,” really “new,” not just “improved”

The prophetic mindset looks at the world as a bigger picture: God is “with the entire world” and loves the world, the whole world. While we may rightly say, “God

chooses us,” we also must remember to say just as clearly, “God chooses them.” God is free to make different responses that come from God’s free, unexpected grace and devotion (“steadfast love”) for the entire world (John 3:16). This is a faith that is open to and hospitable to the outsider, even the enemy, and is considerate of every person. In this mindset God is concerned about every nation and people, and God continues to notice how creation is used.

When John the Baptist and Jesus call on the people to repent, we are invited to change everything about the way they think, operate, and relate to others. We will need to change their expectations and their allegiances. We “know” the imperial mindset very well; it is the water of the ocean in which we are immersed every day. The repentance that Jesus calls for results in total transformation. We are no longer conformed to the way that the culture around us operates; we are “converted” to something new, and this new way is a way that subverts the old mindset.

Finally, let me describe two ways that illustrate how this transformation operates to subvert the dominant mindset.. Both mindsets use the same words, but mean very different things; we use the same words but speak different languages. Our mindset is different because we have recalculated.

First, both mindsets desire “justice,” but for the dominant, imperial mindset, justice means “giving people what they deserve.” People who work hard and long deserve more. The rich and strong are seen as deserving and “blessed” because they obviously must have done things “right.” The poor, the weak, the handicapped deserve much less—or even nothing. If you make a mistake, you deserve to suffer the consequences; if you are successful, you deserve to be richly blessed.

For the prophetic, subversive mindset, justice means “giving persons what they need (which is not the same as giving them what they want and ask for).” Everyone needs enough bread for the day (daily bread); everyone needs a chance to begin again after they make a mistake (forgiveness), everyone needs to have companions who walk with them when they are in need.

The second illustration is that both mindsets desire “peace,” but for the dominant mindset, “peace” means imposing a situation in which the status quo is maintained. Peace in this mindset can be enforced by the threat (and presence) of superior force. For the prophetic, transformed mindset, “peace” means a place and time in which every person thrives and experiences well-being and community

Jesus invites us to “repent, recalculate.” I repeat and renew that call today.

Amen and Amen. And may all God’s people say, “Amen!”

Our song of response is found in the blue hymnal #534, *Prince of peace, control, my will*. I want us to change the fourth word from “control” to “transform;” Prince of peace, transform my will. Jesus, showing us what God desires, is not interested in controlling us; that is the royal mindset. Jesus desires to “transform” us.