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Sermon for January 24, 2021

Repentance

At the turn of the new year this year, I, like so many others, was all about the fresh start. I got a haircut. I knew I needed a change, and that was one thing I could actually control. I also felt ready to do more. Back when the pandemic started, it was all about survival mode. But with the new year, it felt like there was energy to get back into pre-pandemic practices and even set some new goals.

The readiness for change is something I’ve also noticed in our country. Across the political spectrum there’ve been people calling for unity. For healing. For coming together. It was as though the deep divisions have been weighing on us and many are ready to move past them. But along those lines some have urged caution. That rushing into healing and unification may gloss over things that need to be addressed. As author Austin Channing Brown has said, “I’m wholly uninterested in a conversation about unity that’s not rooted in the unrelenting pursuit of racial justice.”

The reality is, fresh starts, new beginnings, moving from one way of being into something else… don’t just happen — unless maybe it’s a haircut. It doesn’t matter how much we *will* it, or *want* it or are ready for it. For meaningful change to happen, we have to identify and correct what wasn’t working.

Think about it this way. With New Year’s resolutions, we make them because we’re unhappy with the way something is, and we want it to be different. Like with the common resolution, exercise, we notice we’re not moving enough. Our bodies don’t feel as good or we worry about future health implications. So we gear up and get out and exercise for the first few weeks of January. But we also know that 80% of all New Year’s resolutions fail by the second week of February. That’s just 2 weeks away. And it’s not because people don’t want the change or even try really hard.

Often it’s because the root problem was never addressed. The “why we weren’t exercising in the first place” question. Maybe it’s because we have pain that the exercise exacerbates, or we’re overscheduled, or we feel selfish prioritizing our health over other demands.

There might be some simple solutions, like seeing a doctor, switching to low impact exercise, or actually putting time to exercise on our calendar. Or we might have some inner work to do to change how we view and value ourselves. But until we acknowledge the problem, we’re gonna have those few “gung ho” weeks and then slip back into the old patterns.

Whether it’s a small personal change or a mass societal change, I get why we want to rush to the good part — the new beginning, the new healthy us, the place where we’re healed, unified, whole. Looking at our “stuff” is hard. The ego hates it. It hates being wrong. It hates consequences that infringe on what it wants. It fears what others might think of us. It doesn’t want to see how people may’ve been hurt by our actions. As someone said this last week, “We just don't want to go there because shame lurks under all of it.” But if we really want what’s on the other side/ we gotta do the work.

I notice this idea in our reading from Mark. It picks up in what was also a transitional moment and a new beginning. With John’s imprisonment, Jesus is stepping into his role and continuing the next phase of the ministry. And the first thing Jesus says, his “inaugural speech” if you will, is, “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

In the Greek, the time is fulfilled means a time that is full of the presence of the Lord. I see that as the readiness in the air. The grace to do more. The sense of the spirit’s movement that the time for God’s kingdom is now. And what do the people need to do to get ready for this new kingdom that’s coming to them? God’s new order eager to break into their world? Jesus, like John the Baptist before him says, “Repent.”Repent for the kingdom is at hand. Welcoming the kingdom begins with repentance.

Far from how we sometimes see it, repentance is not God’s way of punishing us. Repentance is God’s gift to us. It’s a tangible, accessible way for us to enter into the process of the transformation. The word repentance, *metanoia*, means to turn. It is how we turn from the old way. To say I’m not going to do that anymore, and turn toward the new. It’s like Jesus said about not putting new wine in old wineskins, because they burst, not prepared for the new thing. We have to ready ourselves for the new kingdom so that we can really experience it.

In our reading from Jonah, the people of Nineveh got this right away. Jonah gave them God’s message and that was all it took. Immediately they began fasting and everyone right down to the cows and sheep put on sackcloth. The king said: “Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” The people turned from what they were doing to what God was calling them to. And what’s so interesting is that God makes a turn of sorts, too. The text says, God changed God’s mind about the Ninevites.

As we think about fresh starts, the change we want, and what it requires, there was another place I saw a readiness in the air this last week. And that was in the poem that Amanda Gorman read at the inauguration. Through it she told the story of our country and its possible future, but she was also painting an image of the kingdom of God and what it would look like if it came to our country.

She quoted the prophet Micah, saying: “Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid. If we’re to live up to our own time, then victory won’t lie in the blade, but in all the bridges we’ve made.” We see here the idea of being a place where people have what they need to thrive and it coming not through competing with each other or tearing each other down, but in the bridges we build, the way we cross over the boundaries dividing us, and the ways we seek each other’s good.

She also said, “And yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn’t mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. We are striving to forge our union with purpose. To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters, and conditions of man. And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.” Here we see a vision of us diverse and united, but recognizing it requires something of us; a turn from destructive patterns in our country’s history to embrace another way of being America.

If that’s what we want, as the overwhelming response to the poem suggests, repentance is part of how we get there. Saying we are going to make that turn. Commit to where God is leading us. And ready ourselves for God’s kingdom.

It’s worth asking ourselves this morning: What is the new beginning; the coming kingdom *we* are excited for today? What does it look like? The kingdom of God coming into our lives. The kingdom of God coming into our work. The kingdom of God coming into our family. The kingdom of God coming into our country; our world. And then ask if there’s a place we need to repent, or turn. Turn from biases or a sense superiority. From self-centeredness or putting our own desires before someone else’s. Is it a turn from apathy? Complicity? Or from not valuing myself or others as a child of God?

Whatever it is, I hope we can be like the people of Nineveh and embrace it wholeheartedly. Turning from the old way, towards the new. The kingdom of God ready to break forth in each of us.

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<https://twitter.com/austinchanning/status/1274392349213437958>

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<https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/amanda-gorman-inauguration-poem-transcript-the-hill-we-climb>