

Sermon – September 3, 2023  
“For the promise is yours”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 2:32-42

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people. Ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as we enter Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning! The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you. We have arrived at the first week of Kingdomtide. Kingdomtide continues until Christ the King Sunday on November 21<sup>st</sup>. Let me encourage us to continue or start reading the book of Acts as we journey through that book of the Bible in our worship services this fall. If any would like to dig deeper than our Sunday morning reading, let me encourage us to listen to the Wake-Up Call from Seedbed as JD Walt, Seedbed's "Sower in Chief," leads a daily dive into the book of Acts.

Let me remind us of where we are this week in the book of Acts. We are in Chapter 2, which begins with the day of Pentecost, a time some will remember that we marked earlier this year by wearing bright clothing to remind us of the colors of fire that came on that day. In scripture time, we are ten days after the ascension of Jesus, who is now seated at the right hand of God the Father. During those ten days, the disciples have been in the temple worshipping God, praying together there and in their homes as they have waited for power from Jesus. There is so

much that happens in this chapter, but let us move through the chapter passing over the outpouring of Holy Spirit. We will move past Peter's first response to those in the crowd who have asked two questions that mark the Spirit's arrival, "What does this mean and what must we do?" Let's join the text where Peter is engaging the crowd's second question, "What must we do?"

As Peter speaks to the crowd, he tells them they have crucified their Lord and Messiah. When they hear this news, a change begins to occur in the hearts of those in the crowd. They are "cut to the heart." They realize they have killed their Lord and Messiah. They have made a grave mistake. They have been found working in opposition to God and they do not know what to do. Notice that when the crowd replies to Peter and the other apostles, they change their address to "brothers." Those in the crowd are seeking a connection to Peter and the apostles. The crowd realizes they need the disciples' help. Peter's reply to them is "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."<sup>i</sup> Those around Peter have experienced God in a new way that brings fear of separation from God into their hearts, and those in the crowd are in awe that God is working among them, seen in the manifestations of the outpoured Holy Spirit. They realize the Spirit is poured out on disciples of Jesus and not on themselves. They have encountered God doing something new. They understand that they have opposed God. They have crucified their Lord and Messiah and they fear they are lost. They do not know what to do but hope Peter can guide them. Peter's words to them begin with repentance. Let's leave the rest of Peter's reply for another sermon and look this morning at the first step of Peter's guidance for what the crowd can do, repent.

My idea of repentance was formed as a child and as a youth. I understood repentance as saying you are sorry and maybe you will not get punished or get the punishment you deserve for an egregious act. It also meant that I had gotten caught and I needed to be a lot smarter in hiding or excusing my deviant behavior. The repentance that Peter speaks of to the crowd is very different from my understanding of repentance. It is radically different from my punishment avoidance approach to repentance. It goes well beyond my idea of "let me slide this time and I promise I will work really hard not to mess up again." Oswald Chambers, in his book, "My Utmost for His Highest," defines repentance as causing inexplorable unworthiness in those who repent. Repentance moves beyond our being sorry or anxious over the deserved punishment for

our behavior. The repentance Peter speaks to is the idea of seeking to have our minds renewed, moving us from the mind of Adam to the mind of Christ. Repentance moves us from seeking to be in the place of God to seeking God. Repentance is not me working to change myself, to improve my behavior, but me suddenly getting a view of Jesus Christ, not as I seek to make him but as he truly is, abundant steadfast love.

Let me share more about the biblical idea of repentance and see if a couple of examples found in the scripture will help us all to grow in our understanding of repentance. First, let's look at a familiar passage from Isaiah, chapter 6 verses 1-8, page 635 in the pew Bibles: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"<sup>ii</sup> As we look at Isaiah's vision, let me focus us on verse 6 where Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me ..." He has experienced the Holy. Isaiah has received a new view of God and his response is that he is not able to be in the presence of the Holy. He fears for his life; he realizes he is a sinful man. We can catch in Verse 6 the inexplorable unworthiness of repentance. The distance between God and Isaiah has been made real and he repents. He is unclean. He is aware of his unworthiness, and he knows he is a sinful man. He cries out in desperation asking, like the crowd around Peter, what can I do? God sends a seraph with a live coal from the altar to blot out Isaiah's sin and take away his guilt. He is made clean by God's action. Then Isaiah begins to hear the Lord asking, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?"<sup>iii</sup> And Isaiah's reply is, "Here am I; send me." He has repented at the deepest level. He has been made clean, his guilt and sin are removed, and in response, he now seeks to respond to God's call, responding, "Here am I; send me." Isaiah is transformed by repentance through God's work in his repentant heart.

Let's look at a New Testament example of repentance. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 5:8-11, page 62 in the New Testament part of the pew Bibles. Jesus is teaching the crowds from Peter's boat just off the shore, and at the end of the teaching, Jesus turns to Peter and asks him to put the boat out into the deep water for a catch. Peter tells Jesus there will be no fish but obeys, lets down the nets, and fills both boats with fish. Peter makes the connection between Jesus, God, and the miraculous catch. Let me read the text where Peter responds to Jesus, starting in verse eight: "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."<sup>iv</sup> When Peter sees the catch of fish when he knows there can be no catch, he and all in the boats with him are amazed. Jesus is seen by Peter not as a teacher of the law but as divine. Peter makes the connection between Jesus and God. Peter realizes he is in the presence of God in the flesh and his response is repentance. Peter falls at Jesus' knees and cries out that he is a sinful man, asking Jesus to leave him. Peter is undone. His cry of "Go way from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" parallels Isaiah's cry of "Woe is me." Peter, like Isaiah, experiences inexplicable unworthiness. Peter has glimpsed the divine through the miraculous catch of fish and understands he is a sinful man. He is fully aware of the presence of the Holy and his own lack of holiness.

As Peter moves into repentance and cries out to Jesus, look at what happens. Jesus' response to Peter is "Do not be afraid." These are the words found throughout the Bible when the Holy appears to sinful humanity, and with these words, people are released from the awe of being in the presence of the Holy so that they can act. We find these words often in scripture when an angel is sent to humans with a message. Jesus assures Peter and all in the boat that they are forgiven. Their sins are taken away, their guilt is gone, and from now on, they will be serving God, catching people. With repentance comes forgiveness from Jesus. Those in the boats take the boats and fish to shore and leave everything to follow Jesus. Their response is like Isaiah's, "Here am I; send me." At Pentecost, Peter and the disciples, in the power of Holy Spirit, begin to do what Jesus did when he walked the earth and what he told the disciples they would do: they begin to catch people, 3000 with one cast of the Gospel net.

Let me share another aspect of repentance that I have recently learned that has shaken and begun to expand my own limited understanding of repentance. I continue to be given opportunities to hear from people who were present at the outpouring of God on the campus of Asbury University this spring. One of them shared from the experience of praying at the altar with people who came for prayer, making a statement that caught me by surprise. The words opened up for me a new aspect of repentance. This person shared about the many people who came to the altar seeking repentance and the joy of having the opportunity to repent, to be freed of their sin burden, to receive the joy of God as He forgave them their sins. The people did not come forward in fear but in great joy at having the opportunity to repent. Their question of “What should I do?” was answered with the joy of repentance. The idea of a connection between joy and repentance has begun to change the way I think of repentance. Fading is its connection to fear, shame, avoidance of consequences, and a desire to hide my sin. That understanding of repentance is being replaced by a developing and growing desire in my heart to seek to joyfully bring my sin before God, to Jesus, that I might be forgiven and experience the joy with which Jesus meets our repentance. Don’t we each want to experience God as Isaiah did? Don’t we have a desire in our hearts to experience Jesus as Peter did, to realize that Jesus is the Son of God in the flesh with us? Yes, in that moment when we realize we are sinners and cry out to Jesus, we will experience the ugliness of our sin and we will realize how far we are from Jesus, how much the false self we hold still needs to be transformed into our true self that is in Jesus Christ. We, like Isaiah and Peter, will experience inexplorable unworthiness. But we can through the love of God, through the touch of Jesus, experience the joy of our risen Lord in repentance.

We are about to move into a celebration of Communion, a time when we come to Jesus’ table to break bread with him, to be in his presence, to remember what he did for us so that we do not have to be afraid, where our repentant hearts can experience afresh the joy Jesus has as he forgives our sins. Do we hunger to experience the Holy more completely? Do we desire to have God do a more complete work in us? Do we grasp the joy of God’s desire for our repentance? Are our hearts ready for the work of Jesus Christ through his death on the cross and resurrection to make a way for our sins to be forgiven and to be restored to a right relationship with God? As we move into the service of Communion, we will confess corporately our sins to God. I hope that as we confess and hear the response, “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven,” we begin to realize that we are forgiven, we are loved by God, and that He gave his only son so that

we might have eternal life, and we can find the joy of repentance at Jesus' table. Let us open our hearts to risk repentance and the fruit of joy it brings as we approach Jesus' table this day.

*Pray with me: Jesus, we are yet anxious to come before you and repent. Lord, open our hearts that instead of fear we may be willing to bow our knees with Peter and seek forgiveness and then rise in the joy you give us as our sins and guilt are removed to go with you as those sent into the world filled with amazing grace. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> NRSV Act 2:28 Ibid

<sup>ii</sup> Isaiah 6:1-8 Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah 6:8 Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> NRSV Luke 5:3-11 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3113). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.