**Repent!**

A sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2022

At St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, MA

by The Rev. Chris Wendell

Just days ago, nearly 100 years after the date of his death (almost to the day), the remains of Ernest Shackleton’s arctic ship *Endurance* were discovered in the depths of the Weddell Sea. Because of the water’s frigid temperature and lack of parasitic worms in that ocean, the shipwreck was remarkably intact and even nearly upright as it lay on the sea bed. The ship won’t be salvaged so as not to disturb the artic marine environment, but the images, taken by remote operated submersible drone, were pretty amazing. Newspapers ran these photos alongside the equally striking photos of Shackleton’s failed expedition from 1915.

If you can’t immediately recall Sir Ernest Shackleton – he was a British expedition leader in the age of polar exploration during the early decades of the past century. He was beaten to the South Pole by at least two others, so he gathered a crew of roughly 27 men and several teams of sled dogs with aim of being the first to traverse the entire Antarctic continent through the South Pole. His goal was clear, his men were brave, but, they ran into some back luck…more precisely some bad weather…in the Weddell Sea. Despite it being January, summer in the Southern hemisphere, temperatures dropped very suddenly and very deeply, and pack ice began to harden around their ship. After several futile and backbreaking days of attempting to free the ship using hand tools, they realized it was to no avail. The ice would not relent. They were stuck. And they would be there until thaw….nearly a year later. Like the astronauts of Apollo 13, their mission of discover had become a mission of survival. The difference was, for Shackleton and his crew the journey home wouldn’t be a few days. It would be 19 months. They all made it. Alive.

Much has been written on the leadership of Shackleton during those 19 months, which I won’t rehash here. What I want to note is that the reason they were successful is because each man on the crew was each able to change his intention when the circumstances demanded it. They were able to turn their minds and hearts away from the cataclysmic sense of fear, anger, recrimination, even shame at having become stuck, and pour all their commitment, discipline, self-giving, and energy into a new direction. If they had not been able to change their intention in this way, individually and collectively, they would have perished.

This might not strike you as a story about “repentance”. But I think it is. And if we can Shackleton and his crew’s reorientation from lamenting the circumstanced that got them stuck, to forming a clear intention for the future as an experience of repentance, we will arrive at a broader and more true definition of what “repentance” really means.

Perhaps we think we know what repentance means. You can almost hear it in the word, right? Repentance, penance, penitence, penitentiary, they all share the same Latin root, the word *penitentia*. In the Latin translations of the Bible from the 4th/5th centuries, this is the word that is translated into English as “Repent” in most places. *Penitentia* means to regret or look back with remorse. The implication is that there has been some kind of misdeed or sin that has occurred, and to repent of it is to look back on it with new (and remorseful) consideration. *Penitentia* is an inherently backward-looking action. And for a thousand years, the Western Church built our theology of repentance (and by extension sin) in some measure around the idea of look backwards and atoning to God for past misdeeds. It fits within the whole sin 🡪 suffering but repentance 🡪 salvation narrative which became deeply individualized, personalized, and psychologized through the past two thousand years. I imagine that most of us, myself included, consider a sinful act (or perhaps more than one!) to be a pre-condition for repentance. If repentance is a fundamentally compensatory discipline, making up for some kind of deficit in our actions, then without a previous act of sinfulness, repentance would make no sense.

Today’s Gospel passage, from Luke, is a somewhat obscure story about the crowd trying to apply the logic of sin 🡪 suffering but Repentance 🡪 salvation to the events of their day. The headlines then appear to have been about two incidents of innocent death – one the death of pilgrims slaughtered by Pilate’s soldiers while trying to make their ritual sacrifices at the Temple, the other the death of bystanders onto whom a tower collapsed near Siloam. The crowd around Jesus wants him to affirm their belief that the victims were somehow unrepentant sinners, and hence deserved their fate. (Note – we still hear versions of this bad theology far too often from Christian leaders who attempt to blame occasions of suffering on various groups of people and their sinfulness…the latest of which was the Patriarch of the Russia Orthodox Church suggesting that Ukraine was suffering because the country allows Gay Pride marches. I can’t even begin to unpack all the things that are wrong with that). Luckily I don’t have to, because Jesus flat out rejects this logic: “No, I tell you!” He says. Sin is not a precondition for suffering. And further, he says, “Unless you repent, you also will perish.” Now, there’s been no indication that any of these folks have committed particularly unusual sins. And yet, Jesus is telling them, they must repent. Why? Is he trying to send them down the rabbit hole of Job – of wondering what their sin might possibly be? It’s a rabbit hole we may have gone down in our own lives from time to time – hearing the message that we must repent, which, to be fair, is language we use in church frequently. Repent, we keep hearing, so the next logical question might well be, what do we need to repent of?

But that’s not the kind of repentance Jesus is talking about here. And to understand that, we have to go back further than the 4th century Latin translation, to the earlier Greek manuscripts that we have. In those documents, the word used is the Greek word, “Metanoia”. It’s a combination of two smaller Greek words, “Meta” meaning change. And Noia (a form of nous) meaning mind or intention. So, from the mouth of Jesus, Repent does not mean to look back with regret. It means to change one’s mind, or one’s intention. To have a change of heart. *Penitentia* may have a backwards looking connotation, rooted in past misdeed. But *Metanoia* is a future looking word, focusing not on what has happened, but on what IS happening, what WILL happen. This is the word Jesus said when he said, unless you repent, you too will perish. By the way, the word for perish, can also be translated as “will be lost.” Unless you have a change of intention, you will be lost. When you hear, “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” Do you hear, “Be remorseful for your sins, because time’s almost up.”? Or do you hear, “Change your intentions, because God is showing you the new path?”

Back to Shackleton for minute. Imagine his internal life for a second. Here he is having convinced these men to join him on this risky mission of exploration, only to have pushed too far into the frigid waters and gotten them all stuck. Now he could spend the remaining days they had before they perished, being ashamed and guilt-stricken for what he’d gotten them into. Perhaps he could give in to feeling like a fraud, an incompetent, a leader who no longer deserved his position. He could have repented in the full *penitentia* meaning of the word. And if he had done that, I’m nearly certain they would have all died. Because the key to their survival was to not look at the past and what had been done by whom for what reason at what time that had led them to this suffering. Instead, the key was to change their intentions and to focus on how they would survive together. That was all that mattered, that change of heart, that *metanoia,* that kind of repentance.

And it worked. Shackleton’s men survived for a year on the pack ice, using three lifeboats as shelters. For nine months they watched their ship, the *Endurance*, slowly get crushed by the ice until it eventually sank. Between the cold, the hunger, and the despair, I can only imagine how hard it would have been not to turn on one another and begin assigning blame and fault. But they kept their focus on their new intention, to survive together. When the ice finally began to break up, they carried those lifeboats as far as they could on the ice, before getting in them and somehow making it to Elephant Island…little more than a rock in the middle of the Antarctic Ocean. From there, Shackleton and two others left the rest of the team and sailed 800 miles in a lifeboat over two weeks to reach South Georgia Island where eventually he was able to find help and arrange a rescue of the rest of his crew 3 months later.

These men were saved by their repentance, not by their guilt. And I believe with all the fiber of my being, that God saves us in the same way, by helping us change our hearts, our intentions, our minds for the future – not by asking us to continually rue the past. There probably is, of course, a role for so called “useful guilt” in our lives if it helps to motivate the kind of change of intention that lies at the heart of the repentance Jesus spoke of. But such guilt is secondary to God’s purposes, which are always forward looking and transformative, not backward looking and punitive.

God knows that we have much need right now for repentance. Like Shackleton’s crew, we face incredible collective challenges – the need to bring peace into Eastern Europe, the need to repair centuries of racial discrimination in this country, the need to live in ways that will sustain life on this planet – and without a change of intention, we may well perish. Shame over how we got here will not save us. Assignment of blame will not save us. Regret over our actions and inactions will not save us. The only thing that can save us is to change our intentions for the future. To listen for the whole truth with a much more open heart. To act in ways that put the needs and interests of others ahead of our own. To be willing to put love first and everything else second. To repent, not with sackcloth and ashes, but by realigning our actual lives more closely with God’s dream for this world – so we might not perish. Now that’s a repentance I can get behind.