

“Sin and Repentance (What!?)” based on Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

My natural instinct, when I hear the word sin, is to stick my fingers in my ears and sing a song approximating “la la la, I can't hear you.” For the most part, this is not particularly productive.

 ;) For the most part.  ;)

To a certain degree, I think it is justifiable. Too much of Christianity focuses on individual sin: on guilt, the need forgiveness, and the threat of punishment for said sins. While this doesn't seem to go back to Jesus, it does have a long history in the church. In fact, this fear based scheme has been a primary funding tool for churches for a REALLY long time. Churches who claim the exclusive power to offer God's forgiveness have usually offered it with a price tag.

Thus, within the church, sin language has sounded like manipulation, for the purpose of controlling people, that mostly prevents the full and abundant lives that God ACTUALLY wants from us. Furthermore, focusing on individual sins keeps us from having time, energy, and passion to dismantle the CORPORATE sins of institutions and our society at large. (Like, for example, churches manipulating people to get their money.) Since I don't believe God intends for us to be motivated by fear, and I don't think good comes from guilt nor shame I really don't buy into the standard logic on this topic. I do believe we need Divine Grace, but not to prevent us from condemnation in hell; more because all of us seek love and acceptance in our lives and knowing that God is already there loving and accepting us is a very good start to healthy living.

For many people the assumptions about sin, punishment, forgiveness, and God are the CORE of their faith; they think it IS Christianity. Thus, I often disengage from the word, and just tone it out. Tearing down people's faith isn't a good thing. However, what serves me well running in Christian circles does not serve me nearly as well when I'm working with the Bible. The Bible doesn't mean “sin” the way that mainstream Christianity does. When I block my ears from the word, I often miss important things in the text.

All of this is to confess that in all the years I've read this Gospel passage, I've always mentally skipped over the lines, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” (NRSV)

Suddenly, now, it occurs to me to wonder what sins they're talking about and why. And suddenly, it becomes clear that Mark is quoting Isaiah, and the context of Isaiah might make sense of Mark ... and this might actually be a very important question. (Which means I likely should have paid attention to this earlier.)

The Isaiah text today is the beginning of Second Isaiah, and this is the same text Mark quotes. The massive book of Isaiah (66 chapters) is believed to actually be three different prophets at three different times. The first speaks before the Exile, warning about it. Second Isaiah speaks in the immediate aftermath. The Exile is the name for the defeat and conquest of Jerusalem by the

Babylonian Empire in 587 BCE. At that time, after a long siege, the city fell, and atrocious violence resulted. Many were killed, the city's walls and temple were destroyed, and the remaining leaders were taken into captivity in Babylon. This was the Exile. It lasted 70 years by the shortest counts.

First Isaiah contains many dire warnings about what will happen if the systems don't change. Second Isaiah represents a huge change in tone in the book starting with the words, "Comfort, O Comfort my people says your God." Into the immediate aftermath of the horror, the prophet speaks words of comfort and hope. The people generally assumed that their military defeat was a punishment from God, and into that assumption is spoken a declaration that the punishment has ended. It is followed by a vision of God in action, making it easy for those who were forcibly marched as captives to Babylon to walk home with ease and safety. It is this that is quoted in Mark, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Then comes the "comfort" of a reminder that those who oppress will also fade, that oppression will not stand. Finally, our passage evokes God as Shepherd King, gathering the people, leading them, feeding them, and carrying them home.

All of this is evoked in Mark. It is as if the people feel like they are back in Exile and are needing God's help finding their way home – again. The people are experiencing oppression from an outside force, and presumably many of them are now wondering if this oppression is a punishment from God, and therefore if there is a need to repent in order for God to restore them once again. If that experience of being dominated by Rome felt like the experience of being dominated by Babylon in the Exile, then it makes sense that the same theological reasoning would apply to both. Under this perspective, John the Baptist was there to make that repentance possible, and therefore change the reality of oppression.

Now, the ancient Jews, like their descendants today and the Bible itself, focused on COMMUNAL sin: on the injustices of society, on the systemic harm done to the vulnerable, on practices that harmed the weak, on systems that kept some down and some on top of them, etc. Those prophets of old were consistently accusing the kings of abusing their power, of forgetting that their power existed to care for the vulnerable and disempowered. The prophets, time and time and time again, reminded those in power that God had envisioned a just society; and warned that instead it had become exploitative.

Those prophets kept saying that if things didn't change, the society would not be able to hold up its own weight. This may be why most of the people interpreted the Exile as God's punishment, even though the prophets saw it simply as a consequence. But since this was a common understanding of how the world works, and since the people in the time of Jesus were living lives of oppression and exploitation from an external empire, it seems likely that they would be aware again of their communal sin and be seeking ways to reconnect with God who was known to act to restore their holistic communal life.

And this John the Baptist guy, he gave them a way to do it. Furthermore, the Temple at that point was understood to be the place to seek forgiveness, but the Temple had been appropriated by the Roman Empire and no longer truly existed to serve God OR the people. In fact, it may have been more of a source of manipulating the people than serving anyone. John had taken power and authority that was assumed to belong to Temple, and was using it to give people a way to connect to God who might act to change their oppression.

This is the man who will baptize Jesus. That means, this is the man who Jesus looked to as teacher. They really were working with some powerful and dangerous ideas! No wonder the Empire felt threatened.

As I've reflected on these texts and the themes of Exile and Return, I've wondered how those themes fit our lives. Do we feel like we are in Exile even within our own country like the Jews of Jesus day did? There are certainly many ways that is true. And we yearn for the restoration of the country as we thought we knew it and as we think it should be. There are many within our country who do not experience its benefits, who also have reason to identify primarily with the Exile.

There are also ways that we might identify with the Babylonians, the captors. This is less comfortable, but sometimes it is true anyway. As citizens of the country with the world's most significant military might, we might admit that our country is like Babylon to many. Or, we might consider the impacts of unfettered capitalism on the world, of patriarchy, and of white supremacy. Each of these are forms of Exile, and to the extent that we are parts of groups that benefit from them, we are the captors.

Oppression dehumanizes everyone involved. As much as the ancient Jews yearned for God's actions to free them from oppression, if the Babylonians (and Romans) had known what was good for them, they would have yearned for the same. The Exiles repented in hopes of changing their reality of being oppressed. The Babylonians needed the same change too – but with far less awareness of their need. Everyone was dehumanized, and everyone needed freedom from the system. Please note that the same amount of harm was not done to oppressed and oppressor, but at the same time the oppressor was dehumanized to the extent that they dehumanized others. Does that make sense?

For example, I'm saying that while slavery did most of its harm to the slaves, the actions of dehumanizing the slaves inherently marred the humanity of the slave owners. The slave owners may have thought they were reaping benefits, and financially they were, but significant and yet invisible damage was done to their ... to their souls and their humanity. That damage lives on, still harming individuals and the collective today in the form of racism.

So, if what God seeks is people who are living full and abundant lives with their humanity (and their souls) intact, then God inherently is seeking a world without oppression. Throughout many eras, God's people have repented in hopes of transforming oppression. To repent, as the word comes from the Hebrew, means "change of mind."¹ Getting out of the mindset of oppression is an imperative initial step of changing it, from either side. (Thought it is VERY rare that

transformation from oppression comes from oppressors who reap the visible gain from the system.) That opportunity that John the Baptist was giving individuals to repent of their communal sin is looking better and better.

It does turn out that most of us HAVE gotten to particulate in (at least a variation of) John the Baptisms ritual. 😊;) I know, I know, I'm just a font of novel information. As previously mentioned, I'm usually squirmy about "sin" language, and thus I haven't always been the biggest fan of the first two baptism questions in the UMC. However, as they come to focus with this story, they might be waaaaay more awesome than I thought. Hear them again:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?²

These baptismal vows offer us a way to "change our minds" from the oppressive ways of the world, and live in freedom from oppression. They give us a chance to reject the systems of injustice. They let us dream of and be part of the the world we want to build. They free us from the power of sin that keeps us stuck in oppressive systems, and lead us to freedom for ourselves and for all people.

The best part is, as United Methodists, we believe that baptism is a God's good gift given to us and humans cannot, ever, in any way, mess it up. So, that freedom from sin and that opportunity to repent from systems of oppression so that we can live in (and MODEL) freedom – that's with all us for the long run. We can always have access. We are never cut off. Thanks be to God, for messages of sin and repentance that lead us to freedom from oppression. May we lean into our baptismal vows and use the power God gives us to live lives of freedom for ourselves and those around us. Amen

¹W. Tatum Barnes "John the Baptist and Jesus: a report of the Jesus Seminar" (Polebridge Press: Sonoma, CA, 1994) page 122.

²In this case, I got these from:

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-baptismal-covenant-iv> so I didn't have to type them, on December 6, 2017.

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