

"THE DAY GOD REPENTED"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Johnny Moses, a Nootka Indian from the Pacific northwest tells a story about an English missionary-priest who came to his tribe back in the eighteen hundreds. It took the missionary-priest a long time to learn the language of the Indians,

"And when he did" said Johnny Moses, "he began to preach and the people were sorry that they had taught him our language."

He went on to say more...

"He spoke in an English dialect. He told our people about hell. No one knew what hell was. They asked the priest where hell was and he told them it was the place where the bad people always went..."

"Well, our elders told the priest that our ancestors had never given us directions to hell, so none of us had ever been there. Then the priest told us that he would baptize us and that we would have to go to confession once a week and eat fish on Friday."

"There was a very old man in our village. The priest baptized him and named him Anthony. The priest told Anthony that he would have to go to confession once a week and eat fish on Friday. Anthony asked the priest 'what was Friday?'"

"Some time later, the people of the village said Anthony was not going to confession. So the priest went to see him. It was a Friday. When he found Anthony, the old man was cooking deer meat. The priest asked him why he was eating deer meat, and Anthony told the priest that he was very old and that he had shot the deer with his bow and arrow."

"He told the priest that although he was very weak, he drug the deer to the river and there he baptized the deer and named him Fish in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

It takes more than a little bit of water and a new name to bring someone into the Kingdom of God, doesn't it? For adults, only real repentance can do that. Only an earth-shaking change - like unto being born all over again... can ever provide entrance in to that Kingdom.

Frederick Buechner writes that,

"To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying 'I'm sorry' than to the future and saying 'WOW!'"

I like that. WOW!

GOD REPENTED ONCE

The Scriptures tell us that way back there once-upon-a-time that even God repented. It was back in the time of Jonah, the Prophet. Remember how Jonah was sent to the wicked city of Nineveh. He was to tell the people that God was going to destroy their city because of their sins. So Jonah preached and the people repented...from the King right on down to the lowliest person in the city. It was amazing. Probably the most successful revival crusade ever conducted.

Then the Bible says something even more amazing took place. When God saw that the people of Nineveh repented, He repented. God repented of His anger and decided to spare the city. And this, you may recall, was exactly what Jonah had feared might happen. That is why when God called him to Nineveh, he headed off in another direction and was swallowed up by a giant fish, but that's another story. We'll save that for another sermon....a whale of a sermon.

How can God repent? Have you ever wondered about that. It raises some interesting questions. God cannot sin. How could a perfect God ever feel sorry for His actions? Is it because repentance is much more than feeling sorry for our sins? Repentance is a change of direction. I think there are a lot of people out there who really feel sorry for their messin' around, for their mistakes, for their sins. Their lives are filled with guilt and regret but...they never seem to change. Let me offer four thoughts to you in connection with where this may lead us. I hope they will be of some help.

FEELING SORRY IS AT LEAST A BEGINNING

Of course, feeling sorry is at least a beginning. And I think that this is where it has to begin...repentance, that is.

Until recently there was a red brick prison in Germany known as Spandau. You've heard of it. It held one man, Nazi war criminal, Rudolph Hess. Remember Hess? The number three Nazi who parachuted into England back in the early years of World War II. Sentenced forty-three years ago to life imprisonment, this aged Nazi wandered the halls and gardens of Spandau prison waiting his death. Then one Summer he strangled himself...and now the old prison has been torn down.

Rudolph Hess never repented...never showed any signs of it. Guilty of the most atrocious sins a man could ever commit, he never once felt any remorse. Until the day he died he thought of himself as the Deputy Fuhrer of the Nazi Party. Listen to Hess' last public statement offered by him at the Nuremberg trials,

"I was allowed for many years of my life to work under the greatest son that my people produced in their thousand year history. Even if I could I would not want to erase this. I am happy to know that I have done my duty to my people...as a loyal follower of my Fuhrer. I regret nothing."

"If I were to begin again I would act just as I have acted, even if I knew that in the end I should meet a fiery death at the stake. No matter what men may do to me, some day I shall stand before the judgement seat of the Eternal. I shall answer to Him and I know that He will judge me innocent."

Hess saw no need to repent. His stubborn pride would not allow him to admit that he had been guilty of some barbarous crimes. You know, at times, I have the feeling that there is a tiny part of each of us that also clings to pride and self-righteousness, that screams out, "Don't repent... you have no need to!" "Don't even say, 'I'm sorry!'".

In a monster like Hess perhaps we can catch a glimpse...see a dim reflection of the darker side of our own nature. Repentance "un-accomplished" - whether it festers in an ancient prison, or in a quiet suburban backyard or in a noisy urban setting...repentance un-accomplished can be ugly and offensive. Yes, perhaps we cringe at the example of a Rudolph Hess, but cringe even more at the part of him that lurks there within ourselves. Feeling sorry is at least a beginning. However, there's more, and so let's move on to a second thought...a second step.

REPENTANCE REQUIRES A REAL CHANGE

I believe that real repentance refers to and speaks of a real change.

C. S. Lewis it was who once wrote that,

"All people are on their way to becoming either creatures so loathsome that we meet them now only in nightmares, or creatures so glorious that we would be strongly inclined to worship them if we could see them as they will be..."

Repentance - real repentance - is a matter of changing direction. "Loathsome creature" or a "glorious" child of God. The choice is ours to make.

There was a tragic news story sometime back about a man called Georgi Markov. Markov, a Bulgarian author, aged 49, thought he was safe. He had penned a book that was not very favorable in its description of the government of Bulgaria and so he fled his native land, headed to find peace and a new life in London. However, he had forgotten one thing and that was that the enemy doesn't give up on you just because you've changed sides or changed your address.

Unfortunately, it was a lesson that came home swiftly one night to him while walking on London's Waterloo Bridge. He was walking across the bridge, coming home to his family after a day's work. Suddenly he felt a sting on the back of his thigh. He turned around and saw a man bending to retrieve an umbrella. "Oh, sorry..." said the man...muttering the word through a thick foreign accent.

The next day Markov was dead. Scotland Yard announced that doctors had found in his thigh a pellet containing ricin, a rare poison extensively studied in Eastern Europe for which there is no known antidote. The pellet was only the size of a pinhead and had four openings to hold the deadly poison. Once inside the body, it could not be rejected.

Markov was seeking to change "kingdoms"...to change his allegiances, the ultimate loyalties of his life, but he didn't quite make it, but the "Good News" is that we can. You and I can. Part of the struggle is understanding that repentance involves that kind of shift - from the "kingdom of self" to the "Kingdom of God"...from the kingdom of purposelessness to one of Divine passion.

No longer are we our own. We have a new Guide for our lives...a new Standard.
A New King.

A NEW LIFE-STYLE

But on to the third point. For some of us that will undoubtedly mean a new life-style.

Sam Jones, one of the great revival preachers of this century, used to conduct what he called "Quittin' Meetings" during his revivals. So-called because he gave people the opportunity to confess their sins and to do some repenting. And many QUIT swearing and drinking and smoking and gossiping... etc., etc. He happened to ask one woman what she planned to "quit" as a part of the follow up and she replied,

"I ain't been doing nothing and I'm agonna quit that, too."

Repentance might mean getting rid of some bad habits. And certainly it would be in our best interests to do so. Last Sunday afternoon I was watching the Bob Hope Desert Classic and was reminded that John Mahaffey, who won the Bob Hope Classic back seven or eight years ago, decided about ten years ago to get rid of some of his bad habits in order to be a better golfer. He said that he quit smoking and drinking and carousing and a few other things and at 35 years of age began to feel better than he had at 25 years of age.

Yes, it's in our best interest to get rid of some unhealthy habits, but But most of us are more like the old lady who said that she "ain't been doin' nothin'" and was "goin' to quit that, too!" A change of life-style may mean that we "quit doin' nothin'" and get involved in some area of-life that "lifts us up" rather than "pulls us down"...some area perhaps of Christian service in a place like this - to the young or the aged or the less fortunate. It may mean developing greater loyalty to our Church, a willingness to talk to others about the things of faith, a commitment to make life count for those things that are lasting and really do matter.

A new life style. If this speaks to you and you feel moved to take a step up, share it with me. I'll be glad to lend a hand.

GOD'S AGENT IN THE WORLD TODAY

A fourth and a final thought to share.

Per aps it's a bit of an extension of the preceding point, but - in short - true repentance means becoming God's man or God's woman in the world today. It means - yes - establishing some new priorities dependent on God's purpose for our lives. It means adopting some new values and seeing things in a new light and then - by God - sticking with it even when the temptation to let go of them presents itself and it will.

There was a man who lost his job back there in the great depression of the thirties. His savings were quickly gone and then he and his wife lost their home. And then his grief was multiplied when his wife died rather suddenly. The only thing he had left was his faith and even that was in danger of weakening.

One day when he was out looking for work, he stopped to watch some men who were doing the stone work on a church building. One of those men was skillfully chiseling a triangular piece of rock. Not seeing the spot where it would fit, he asked the man, "Where does that go...where does that fit?" The man pointed toward the top of the church building and said,

"See that little opening up there near the spire? Well, that where it goes...I'm shaping it down here so it will fit up there...."

"Shaping it down here so it will fit up there". The man said that it was as if God were suddenly speaking to him through those words. "Shape up down here so you'll fit in up there". Not a bad idea. That man discovered what he must do with his remaining days...."shape up his life down here...."

Who knows, perhaps some person here today needs to make that same discovery. This isn't all there is, my friend. There's more to come...believe it. Remember down here God permits some U-turns on His highway. This is the time of year when we remember that Saul changed the direction of his life and became Paul. January 25th - the "re-birth" of a man. December 25th - the birth of a child. And yes, even God repented once. He was planning to destroy a city because of its wickedness, but the people repented and He changed His plan.

So, what about your change of plans. Are you ready? You've been walking your own way. What about walking in His way. Being baptized with water will not of itself make you a new person "in Christ" any more than deer meat can become fish because it has been baptized. It takes more than that, but it can happen. It does happen. And it can happen - here now, quietly...in your life.

LET US PRAY

Make us sensitive to Your presence and nearness in this Church at the end of this service. Point out some markers along the way to those who may have lost their way. Wrestle with each of us in the dark and hidden corners of our lives. Melt us. Mold us. Fill us. And then use us, Lord. For your purposes here on earth so that we may fit in better to Your eternal kingdom of light in the life beyond this. Amen.