

February 21, 2010: Sacrifice, Sacrifice, Sacrifice
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Springwater Presbyterian Church -- Eileen Parfrey

A feisty mother superior was asked, “If Jesus himself was outside the door, what would you say?” She didn’t even hesitate before she replied, “Look busy!” That’s bumper sticker theology. Maybe her questioner was hoping for a holier bumper sticker, something along the lines of the cartoon character who carries the sign, “Repent! The end is near!” Given all the salvation talk today in Romans, I wonder which bumper sticker the apostle Paul would have on his car. Maybe he’d have the one that says, “I’ve been saved, but God has withdrawn me and put me back into circulation.” You’d have to have been raised in an economy good enough to remember savings accounts.

Repentance, being saved, the end of the world, has gotten entangled with all manner of emotional and theological baggage, so that most people won’t even talk about it, but here we are at Lent. This is the time in the church calendar in which repentance gets a starring role, usually to the tune of “What are you giving up?” Richard Rohr reclaims the honor of repentance, suggesting it is God’s invitation to us to keep growing, to keep changing, to be transformed.¹ The Greek word, which we usually translate as “repent,” is *metanoia*, meaning literally “change your mind.” I’ve been thinking about repentance a lot lately, and have decided that repentance is good news. We’re not called to change *who we are*, we’re just called to change our *minds*, to give up being the center of the universe, to give up trying to be in control, to realize all of this is not about us.

I get this from Deuteronomy. By companioning Deuteronomy with today’s Romans text, we’re invited to let go of the traditional reading of Moses’ instructions to Israel. Traditionally, we read the offering of firstfruits as a kind of transactional payback to God for the wonderful gift of the Promised Land—gratitude as what we “owe” God. Moses is giving Israel a liturgy, it’s about a communion offering, not a sin offering. Most of the prescribed sacrifices were actually communion events—religious parties, celebrations—with the exception of sin offerings and rituals around the scapegoat. Sacrifices were the occasion for festive gatherings of all God’s people (read, “party”), which therefore meant making sure the poor, the hungry, and the alien were included as well as your own family. What the firstfruits liturgy means is, “I did nothing to deserve this, the blessings are mine for a time, therefore I share this blessing with you and others who have none.” This sacrifice was the means of being close with God and neighbor.

That helps as we read Romans and try to understand what Paul means by “saved.” The word Paul uses is *sozo*, which we translate as “saved,” but if you were taking the Greek to Hebrew, the word you would use is “shalom.” To be *saved* is to be brought to healing and wholeness. It doesn’t mean getting into heaven. For Paul, justification is “to have the impediments to shalom removed.” This means that “to be saved,” is not a discrete event (“I was saved at a Billy Graham Crusade”). Being saved is a matter of *dwelling* in God’s heart.

¹ *The Naked Now*, Richard Rohr, pp 91 ff

It's a state of being. Which begs the question, what is the content of the belief which is necessary to being saved? That God has already acted to reconcile us to God's self.

With this understanding, repentance becomes a horse of a whole different color. Repentance no longer means acquiring a set of behaviors, beliefs, belonging systems. Give up drinking, smoking, swearing and gambling. Get the right doctrines into your head. Join the holy-roller-est church. These may be good things. But I think what Paul has in mind is a little more *self* critical than compared-to-others-and-how-I-might-appear critical. Those of us who participated in the readership consultation for the Common English Bible might have noticed the uncanny resemblance of Deuteronomy 26 to our assigned reading in the first 12 chapters. These passages are nearly identical, except that the verbs in 26 are now singular, rather than the plural they are in the beginning of the book. There is such a thing as corporate self-criticism, and we call those people called to that task "prophets." Today's text is in the singular, so today we're talking individual repentance, individual self criticism.

So often, discussion of individual salvation devolves into concerns about who gets into heaven, and that becomes "pie in the sky in the sweet by and by." But if salvation really means shalom, it is as *now* as it is later. Catherine of Siena says, "It's heave all the way to heaven, and hell all the way to hell." Deuteronomy reminds us that God's plan of salvation is abundant *living*, not correct ideas or good doctrine. Deuteronomy's original audience was a nomadic, herding people about to become landed farmers. Speaking of change! They would give up pitching tents to learn to sweep floors. Rather living on the move, following the water and grass for their flocks, they were about to take up the risky practice of burying their resources in the ground and waiting for crops to appear. The life of abundance God offered them was sustainable, agrarian, simple. It's milk and honey, folks, not filet mignon and French burgundy wines. Shalom, not the Waldorf Astoria. If salvation is heaven, we don't get there because our theology is sound or we're on the right side of the debate regarding ordination of gays. We get there through reconciliation, through communion—with God.

Richard Rohr writes, "As soon as we change into communion we are immediately in heaven." That's what is meant by, "Repent! The end is near!" Thank God. "Repent" as in change your mind. To choose communion, rather than hiding in shame (as we did in the Garden) or by serving as God's consultant, telling God what to do, when to do it, who to do it with. Another writer comforts with these words, "To be human is to change, to be perfect is to have changed many times."² There is a sweet parable that illustrates how God's plan for our reconciliation (our salvation) is part of who we are, integral to our identity. God ordains that, even though we knew heaven before we were born, we forget where it is as part of being born and we only find it again in the process of living. Just before we're born, the Birthing Angel places her finger on the spot between our nose and lips and leaves a mark. That mark tells us, "The word is very near to you, on your lips and in your heart." Repent. You are already saved.

² Rohr quotes Cardinal Newman in his book, *The Naked Now*.