

Sing this prayer with me, please -  
O God who made the heart and ear,  
we listen care'fly as you draw near,  
to hear your word in many ways,  
and live your life through all of our days.  
Amen.

Hear these words from the gospel of Matthew 4:12-17, 23.

This is a word from God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

I. Introduction

I love to walk.

How about you?

One of my favorite things to do when I am in a new place is get up early, before dawn, and walk around as the sunrises and see how the place wakes up.

I love the feel of my tennis shoes on the concrete of a sidewalk as I walk, look, and listen.

I love to pray as I walk, remembering the name of a friend with each step, asking for God's mercy for them with each breath.

I love to walk.

God, I think, loves to walk, too.

Theologian Kosuke Koyama once described God as the "three mile an hour God" because Jesus conducted his ministry on foot, walking between the villages of Galilee and eventually to Jerusalem, at the speed of walking, which is three miles an hour.

When we think of the stories we read and hear in the Bible, we hear this walking God.

God is a God who is always on the move.

(Mountain, tent, Ark of the Covenant, temple, Incarnation, every human being)

During Lent, Pastor Jennifer and I are preaching a series about our walking God, our God on the move.

The title of the series is “Meeting Jesus on the Road.”

Our intention is to help us, not go on a “road trip” with Jesus, though that kind of sounds fun to me, but to go on a pilgrimage, to journey to places where we can encounter God in the here and now.

It is to help us come to an understanding that faith is not a thing that one either has or doesn't have, nor is it a set of beliefs about God. Rather, it is a relationship with God and with each other that grows and changes over a lifetime, that grows and changes as we walk with each other with Jesus.

That grows as we meet Jesus on the road.

That grows as we walk with our walking God.

## II. Repent

In today's text, we meet Jesus on the road as he begins his ministry.

Listen as he proclaims his first words of the ‘euangelion,’ the good news that he has come to preach.

“Repent,” he says, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

You may ask, “Pastor Trevor, how can you use the word good news to describe the word ‘repent?’

That is a great question.

Preachers have used the word ‘repent’ for a long time as a way to guilt and shame people into being the people they want them to be and doing the things they want them to do.

It's not my intention to guilt and shame you into being and doing anything.

But I would like to shine a light on the word ‘repent’ and think about its meaning for a moment.

In her beautiful, meaningful book *World Without End*, Martha Park speaks about ‘pentimento.’

It's an Italian word. I love to say it. Pentimento! Say it with me. Pentimento!

It's a word that refers to the presence of first drafts and abandoned images underneath a painting's finished surface.

Some of these pentimenti are visible only under infra-red light and X rays, but some appear, plainly visible to the eye, as the layers of paint grow thin over time.

As you may have guessed, 'pentimento' is Italian for repentance.

Pentimenti offer an understanding of repentance that goes beyond reflexive guilt or impotent apology.

It teaches us that repentance is a fresh attempt, a new start.

And who of us in this sanctuary on this first Sunday of Lent doesn't need a fresh attempt, a new start?

And imagine if broken systems went through the act of pentimento.

What might it look like if the government of the United States, whose goal it should be to take care of widows, orphans, and strangers in our midst, but which has passed a "big, beautiful bill" and carried out ICE raids that hurt those who are the least and most forgotten among us, those who take up such a big part of God's heart, went through an act of pentimento?

Our government could make a fresh attempt, a new start, to build life according to the heart of God.

What might it look like if racist organizations, whose goal it is to continue a system of white supremacy in this country, went through an act of pentimento?

Racist organizations could make a fresh attempt, a new start, to build life according to the heart of God.

What might it look like if we, the beloved community of Triune Mercy, went through an act of pentimento?

We can make a fresh attempt, a new start, to build like according to the heart of God.

Recently, a friend stopped me on the sidewalk between Stone Avenue and the Mercy Center and asked me to sit beside him on the brick wall.

His hair and beard were uncombed and unkempt, his clothes tattered and torn, his feet battered and bruised from the hard, mean streets.

His blue eyes were as bright and clear as a cloudless, winter's noon. He placed a calloused hand on my shoulder.

"I'm afraid," he said sincerely with a crack in his voice, "that God won't forgive me anymore. I've asked too many times. Do you think God will forgive me?"

A moment of holy silence fell upon us.

I placed my hand on his shoulder.

“Yes,” I said.

His eyes filled with tears.

That’s the beautiful, wonderful thing about the good news that Jesus proclaims.

With each act of penitence there is forgiveness.

There is a way to make a fresh attempt, a new start.

There is a way to build life according to the heart of God.

III. The kingdom of heaven is near

How can I describe the “kingdom of heaven” with you? When I speak about the “kingdom of heaven” or the “kingdom of God,” I borrow a term from the Civil Rights Movement - “the beloved community.” I wrote this little story to share my understanding of what the beloved community looks like for me here at TMC.

Brother Juniper sat on the brick wall between Stone Avenue and the dining hall of the mercy center watching the sunset.

“My heart is heavy like the sun,” he thought to himself, “And is sinking inside of me until I can no longer see it or feel it.”

Tears fell from Juniper’s eyes, rolled down his cheeks, and dropped to the concrete with little splashes.

He had a big heart, and tried to hold all of the hurt he felt in the world inside of it.

“If I hold it tenderly,” he told Saint Frank once as they were sitting at Saturday lunch with their poor friends in the dining hall of the mercy center, “And sing to it softly, maybe that’ll assuage the pain and help the world smile again.”

“Just be careful no to let it hold you roughly,” responded Frank, “And yell at you loudly, for that could break your heart into a million pieces, and our world needs you whole hearted, my friend.”

“Well,” replied Juniper, “I know what you mean, but if my heart is broken into a million pieces then maybe there are a million places those little pieces could grow to bring a little hope and healing.”

This left both of them still and silent as they thought about the mysteries of the heart.

As still, silent, and thoughtful as Juniper was now.

Like a warm breeze from the South, Tina made her way slowly and surely up the sidewalk pushing a shopping cart with all of her worldly goods inside of it.

She stopped in front of Juniper, ready to say “Hey” to him, but stayed quiet as she looked into his watery eyes and sad lined face.

She sat down beside him.

She looked at the passing cars going through the stoplight at Stone and Rutherford and listened to the night birds as they congregated on the power lines above them.

She waited patiently barefooted and openhearted for her friend to say something.

“Have you ever listened to the news and heard a story so heartbreaking you lose hope that there’s any good in the world?” he whispered, “And

then heard a story the next day and the next day and the next that was even more heartbreaking than the one before?”

Tina was silent as she often was in the face of suffering, for she’d seen and lived hard things on the street and knew the importance of the economy of words.

“And have you knelt down on the sidewalk,” he continued, “And picked up a person for the third day in a row and walked him to a tattered mattress behind an abandoned building because he’d drunk himself into a stupor because he couldn’t face the loneliness of the world anymore?”

Again, Tina was silent.

Juniper’s tears began to fall again, a bit heavier than before, as Tina sat with him.

She reached into her cart and brought out a paper bag filled with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a juice box.

Softly and tenderly, she halved the sandwich with her calloused, gnarled hand and poured half of the juice into a used paper cup.

She leaned forward and gave Juniper a light kiss on the forehead. She gave him the half sandwich and the little cup of juice. She stayed with him until they’d eaten their meal together.

Then she rose and went on her way to look for shelter that might keep her warm, safe, and dry into the long night.

Juniper rose and began his evening walk around the neighborhood.

And on the concrete, in the place where his tear drops had fallen and Tina's bare feet had passed, a dandelion grew out of a crack in the sidewalk, gritty and golden, resilient and reliable, a small miracle to show that God had been there.

#### IV. Spreading good news in bad times

Clarence Jordan was a Southern Baptist preacher and New Testament scholar who believed the Gospel should be lived as radically as it is preached. In 1942 he co-founded Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, creating an interracial Christian community in the heart of the segregated South, where Black and white families lived, worked, and worshiped together despite fierce opposition. A Greek scholar trained at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he translated the New Testament into the Southern vernacular in Cotton Patch form so that Jesus' words would walk the red clay roads of Georgia. With humor, courage, and stubborn grace, he taught that faith without costly obedience is no faith at all, and that the cross still stands wherever love confronts injustice.

Here is how he translated Matthew 4:23 in his Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament.

“And he traveled throughout Georgia, teaching in their churches and spreading the good news of the new order, and healing every sickness and disease that people had.” (Matthew 4:23, CPV)

What might you and I do to live out Clarence's definition of faith today?

What might our obedience to Jesus' call cost us?

How might we confront injustice with love, with the cross of Jesus?

We have parishioners who have recently been housed and who want to come to church on Sunday to be a part of the humor, courage, and stubborn grace of this beloved community but can't get here because busses don't run on Sunday.

We have four vans in our parking lot but no volunteers to drive them to pick up those parishioners.

Is God calling you to drive a van and bring a friend to church? Maybe.

#### V. Conclusion

The great freedom fighter Sojourner Truth once said, “Religion without humanity is poor human stuff.”

And so we stand here on the road with Jesus in our humanity. We make our acts of penitence, repentance.

We walk along in the upside down kingdom of God.

We go to the places where there's hate, injury, fear, despair, shadows, and sadness to sow love, pardon, faith, hope, light, and joy.

We go with Jesus and with each other. Amen.