

# Repentance: Living Like Ralph

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This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, the church enters the season of Lent. It is a season to reflect more seriously and intentionally on our faith.

2000 years ago, becoming a Christian was a big deal. Lent was the final few weeks of a three-year-long process of preparing to be baptized. Liturgical scholar Aidan Kavanagh once quipped that “in the early church, it took three years to become a Christian and five minutes to become a minister; in today’s church, it takes five minutes to become a Christian and three years to become a minister.”

In the early church, Lent was a season to learn how to be a Christian by doing what Christians did—to perform acts of compassion, to give to the poor, to reach out in love to neighbours, and to live with peace and grace. In all these ways, we reflect more deeply on our identity as people who belong to God

A person was baptized into a countercultural community which professed loyalty to God’s way in the world. They longed to honour God’s values in our world: justice, peace, reconciliation, wholeness, compassion, and love. We have been blessed to bless others. We have been healed, so we touch other lives gently. As a community of hope and reconciliation, we reach out to welcome and embrace all people. In all these ways, we embody God’s gospel purposes in the world.

But none of us live up to our highest hopes. I can guarantee that 100% of us will screw up. That’s where repentance comes in as a spiritual discipline in Lent.

Now let me be clear about what repentance means. It’s gotten a bad rap. Too many preachers and priests are happy to tell us that we need to repent, or we will go to hell. They’re simply wrong. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber has said, “If you have been told that God is some kind of punishing, angry [deity] with a killer surveillance system who is basically always disappointed with you for being a human being, then the church has lied to you.” Indeed, those who proclaim this message are guilty of abuse.

Repentance is not insurance for hell. It is not about feeling remorseful about something we have done or failed to do. It does not mean to live with a constant worry that you’re not measuring up. Understanding repentance this way is a legacy of the church’s need to control people.

Rather, the Biblical view of repentance has more to do with changing our hearts and moving into a new future with a new purpose, a new vision, a new hope.

Here is a story which illustrates what I mean by repentance.

A speaker had been invited to speak at a military base one December. Ralph was sent to the airport to meet him. They introduced themselves, and headed toward the baggage claim. All the way down the long concourse, Ralph kept disappearing: once to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open; once to lift two toddlers up so they could see Santa Claus; again to give directions to someone who was lost. Each time, he came back with a big smile on his face, and picked up the conversation where he had left off. The speaker couldn’t figure him out.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked Ralph when he came back for the third time.

“Do what?” Ralph said.

“Where did you learn to live like that?”

“Oh,” said Ralph, “during the war, I guess.” During the drive to the base, he told the speaker about his tour of duty in Viet Nam. His job was to clear mine fields, and he watched one friend

after another blow up before his eyes. “I learned to live between steps,” he said. “I never knew whether the next step would be my last, so I learned how to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot, and when I put it down again. Every step I took, it was a whole new world, and I guess I’ve just been that way ever since.”

When we repent, we see life made new. We learn to treasure life because we understand how fragile life can be. We learn to live with grace and compassion. We become more mindful so that we learn to live as gospel people. We look for and find opportunities to love God by loving our neighbours.

When we repent, we live in a whole new way. Life is shot through with God’s grace and compassion, and repentance is God’s grace at work in our lives, turning us around, transforming our vision, and renewing the way we live.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has the same understanding: “Repentance happens when you suddenly see the abundance of God’s love and generosity in someone else and you come to the realization that you must change. Not only must you change, you want to change. You want this in your life.”

Repentance is the joyful work of finding and wanting the fullness of God in your own life. It’s a holy dissatisfaction with the way things are and deciding to do something about it. It’s learning to see deeply what our holy, life-giving, compassionate God wants in our lives and in our world.

Seen this way, Lent is not a bummer. Lent is a gift in which we come home to our best and truest selves. Seen this way, repentance is not so much a downer. Repentance has to do with doing the hard work and finding the joy of being transformed.

This Lent, I’m not “giving something up for Lent.” I’m going to try to add this sense of growth to my life so that I live into my identity as a child of God. I’m going to try to live like Ralph.