

## Second Sunday of Advent Year A, 2025

Is 11:1-10

Rom 15:4-9

Ps 72

Mt 3:1-12

### *A dog named Metanoia*

Since the time of Adam (Gen 2:19-20), we people have given names to all the things in creation. It's one thing to give a general name to cover all individuals of a species, like mice or pigeons or lizards or clams. It's another thing, and something much more intimate, to give a name to an individual animal (or plant). The choice of a personal name, especially for a beloved pet, is usually done with thoughtfulness and purpose, and sometimes a bit of playfulness or cleverness. As boys, my brother and I found an abandoned female puppy that we took in and named Bob. Her full name was Shish kabob, but we all called her Bob. Clever enough, I suppose for a thirteen year old. I know a woman who named her dog Metanoia.

Now, we've talked about *metanoia* before. Not the dog. But the biblical concept, which is presented to us again in today's passage from the gospel of Matthew, which focuses on John the Baptist, the precursor to Christ, the one who is "a voice ... crying out in the desert: prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." And what does John cry out? What is his message? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Once John is arrested, Jesus will take up John's mantle and his message, using the exact same words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 4:17).

Three times in today's gospel passage, John uses the word repent. We've already heard the first time. A second time, John says: "Produce good fruit as evidence of your *repentance*." And a third time: "I am baptizing you with water, for *repentance*..."

You will remember, or you will have figured out by now, that the word for repentance in biblical Greek is *metanoia*. The problem is that the biblical usage of the word *metanoia* has enormous theological weight. And our English word repentance just can't carry all that weight by itself.

Now repentance is a good thing, a necessary thing. What do we commonly mean when we say repentance? Well, repentance begins with acknowledging our sins. We see this in the gospel, where those "being baptized by John in the River Jordan" "acknowledged their sins." Repenting, we first admit that we have sinned, and we acknowledge our sins. Then we must also be sorry for them, regret them. This regret for our sins, we often call contrition, the sentiments of which are expressed in the opening lines of the act of contrition: "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins ... most of all because they have offended you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love." Repentance is heartfelt sorrow for the wrong that I have done in the past. Repentance necessarily looks to the past, my past sins, my past life.

So repentance is certainly part of *metanoia*. The problem, though, is the *metanoia* as a biblical concept is broader than just repentance. *Metanoia* in its fullest sense involves not just remorse for past sins, but a change of outlook, a conversion, a transformation of mind and heart, an amendment of life. *Metanoia* brings about a change of mind, a change of heart, a change in how we see the world and relate to it and act in it. We hear this powerfully expressed in the letters of St Paul. In his letter to the Romans: “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (12:2). Paul’s exhortations to the Ephesians are meant to show them what are the natural consequences of Christian *metanoia*: “you should put away the old self of your former way of life ... and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth” (4:22-24).

If the first part of *metanoia* is a turning away from sin in sorrow, the second part is a turning toward God in hope, which involves a renewed dedication to God and an abiding commitment to reforming one’s life. There is first an *aversion* to sin and then a *conversion* to God. *Metanoia* in its fullest sense is future-oriented: a change of mind and purpose, a new mindset, a heart renewed, a spirit transformed.

There are two problems, then, that we encounter when trying to render the word *metanoia* in English. One, depending on the context, sometimes the first sense of *metanoia* is called for – sorrow

for sins, repentance – but oftentimes the second sense prevails. So you really have to be attentive to how *metanoia* is used in context. The second problem is that we have no readily available word in English for this second sense of *metanoia*, and so historically, we have just used the word repentance, irrespective of the context, for lack of a better term. And this, frankly, can sometimes amount to a mistranslation.

When John, and later Jesus, command, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” they are saying more, much more, than “be sorry for your sins, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Perhaps the sense of *metanoia* here would sound more like, “Commit yourselves to an ongoing amendment of life, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” or “Be transformed, reform your ways, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” We get the idea, but there is no one word in English that fully captures the sense of *metanoia*, and so we make the word repentance do all the work, carry all the weight, which it just can’t do.

I personally am drawn to the expression “amendment of life” or “amend your ways” to approximate the second sense of *metanoia*. We all make mistakes – call them faults or sins – that we regret. And we pledge to do better, to overcome them. We amend our ways – our way of thinking, of speaking, of acting. We make amends so that we can move on, make progress, move forward. To amend is to change or modify for the better; to improve; to set right. When we amend anything – a constitution, a document, our lives

– we necessarily look to the past with regret and acknowledge the inadequacy, but we also (and mostly) look to the future with hope as we introduce changes for the better. “*Amend your lives, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*”

Such an amendment brings about a renewal, a total transformation in how we see the world and act in the world. This renewal is the work of God’s grace in us, a grace that points us to the glory of the kingdom that is at hand. *Metanoia*, then, is about getting in a headspace and heart-space capable of recognizing and receiving the kingdom of heaven.

*Metanoia*, because the kingdom of God is at hand. *Metanoia*, because the good things of the Lord are coming. *Metanoia*, because we want to be worthy of them, capable of them. So yes, we acknowledge our sins; we take a bath and have them washed away. Such a spiritual bath, as in baptism or the sacrament of confession, which is the renewal of baptism, washes away the grime and reveals the glory. *Metanoia* is about the glory, about our living for glory, not the grime.

Now back to this dog named *Metanoia*. The names we give our pets are usually carefully and sometime cleverly chosen, and they can reveal something about the name-giver. *Metanoia*’s owner – let’s call her June – is a single woman in her early forties, intensely and devoutly Catholic, an intense and super high-energy person. From a distance she looks like some skinny white-girl gone all

hippy, but up close you discover that she's covered in scapulars, medals, prayer bracelets, images of saints. She wears her faith and not just on her sleeve, and you soon learn she *will* talk to you about Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and when you part company with her, you'll turn and say, "Wow!" Her dog Metanoia is her service animal, because, as June puts it, "my whole life since I've been a kid has been one psychiatric crisis after another."

Now that you know a little bit about June's background, can you understand why she might name her dog, her service animal, Metanoia? And if June had to translate *metanoia* into English, how do you think she would render it? Repentance? Seems unlikely. Amendment? Probably not. Next time I see June, which might be twenty years from now, I'll try to remember to ask her. But I'd wager she say something like, my dog Metanoia's name means: *renewal-of-mind-that-lets-me-be-at-peace-in-myself-and-in-the-world*. And then she would add, as she hugged Metanoia around the neck, "and this is what God has done for me. So I am his forever." For June, *metanoia* – both the dog and the biblical concept – is not about the past. It is about the future. A future in which she is renewed in her mind from within by the grace of God. A future full of hope.

So repenting of our sins, amending our lives, let us be transformed by the renewal of our minds, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. That, y'all, is metanoia.