May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight – Our strength and our redeemer – Amen.

If last week’s gospel called us to keep awake and be watchful of the worlds within us and around us, then this week’s gospel calls us to respond. “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” (Mt 3, 2).

What does that mean for you? What is John the Baptist asking of us? What has been your experience of repentance? Does it inspire hope and joy? Or when you hear the word repent do you think, “Uh oh, someone’s in trouble?”

My thinking about and understanding of repentance have changed over the years. I used to think about repentance mostly in terms of behavior and morals. Somebody was in trouble. Somebody had better straighten up and fly right. Repentance meant being sorry, remorseful, for my behavior, trying harder, and doing better next time. It meant being good.

I thought if I could just be good enough and do it all right then everything would work out. Life has a way of dispelling that notion. I suspect you know what I’m talking about. All of us could probably tell stories about times when we did it right, we gave it our best, we tried hard, we made the right decisions, we met the expectations, we did what we were supposed to, and it still didn’t go the way we wanted. Or maybe it did. Maybe we got exactly what we hoped for but we still felt as if something was missing, lacking, and incomplete. We felt empty.

What if repentance is really about returning to our truer and better selves? What if repentance is like learning to walk? It’s not so much about whether we will fall but whether we will get back up again. What if repentance is about recovering the parts of ourselves we have forgotten, ignored, or neglected? What if repentance is simply about the many u-turns we make to get back on track, the opportunity to change our mind, have a change of heart, and change the direction of our life? What if repentance is the recognition that we all are recovering human beings regardless of guilt or innocence?

That would mean hope and not guilt lies at the heart of repentance. Our focus would be less on where we’ve come from and more on where we are headed. It would be less about wrongdoing and more about healing and recovery. That doesn’t mean repentance is about becoming something new, something we are not already. It is rather returning to and reclaiming the original beauty given us at our creation. And who among us here today doesn’t need to make that trip? Who among us here today hasn’t known a time when our original beauty has been ignored, doubted, forgotten, or disfigured?

For those who stay awake and watchful repentance becomes a way of life and it comes in some of the most ordinary ways. Let me give you some examples of what I am thinking of.

* Have you ever gotten so caught up in conversation with a friend, a meal with a loved one, in reading or writing, in music, in your hobby, playing with your kids, sitting in silence at a sunset, and you lose all track of time? In that experience nothing was lacking. Everything was exactly as it should have been. It was perfect and you never wanted it to end. In some way that was a time of repentance and you had returned to and were living from your truest and most authentic self.
* Sometimes the circumstances of life take us out of our center. Someone hurts or betrays us and we begin to feel suspicious or mistrustful. We’re envious of another’s successes, opportunities, and unable to celebrate their joys. Maybe grief or sorrow overwhelm us and cut us to the quick. We can no longer see the beauty of life or ourselves. Those also are moments of repentance, not because we’ve been bad, the feelings are real and maybe even legitimate, but because we know that’s not the life we want to live. That’s not how we want to be. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.
* Sometimes I get in bed at night and look back on the day. I hear words I wish I hadn’t said. I see actions I wish I hadn’t taken and choices I regret. I don’t know what came over me, what possessed me to say and do those things, but I know that’s not who I am. That’s just not me or who I want to be. Slowly, I begin to recover and return to myself. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is coming here.

Repentance is the path we take to live the life we most truly want and to become more fully ourselves. It is an ongoing process, a never ending journey. With each step on that path we clothe ourselves in the attributes and characteristics of God. We put on love, healing, forgiveness, and mercy. We dress in generosity, wisdom, peace, and joy. We wear justice and compassion. With repentance the wardrobe of God is ours. And you know what? It fits. We wear it well.

Repentance brings us face to face with the one who is more powerful, the one who creates and loves us, the one who looks us in the face and says, “I know you. I recognize you. I see myself in the beauty of your face.”

So let me ask you. What keeps you from living the life you want? What holds you back and prevents your from being your truest and most real self? What would it take to be fully you? What might you need to let go of, give up, change, or leave behind? What u-turn might you need to make? ***Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near and you are beautiful, beloved, and holy. Amen.***