

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
REPeNT: Remember
March 1, 2020
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Isaiah 24:4-13
Hebrews 11:32 – 12:2

So what kind of history should we teach? What should we remember? These are two questions that are at the heart of debate not only in our nation, but around the world. I realize that many of you may not be privy to this discussion, but it is one that raises peoples' blood pressure and the decibel level of conversations. There are two basic kinds of history, if you will, that are engaged in this debate. One is what has come to be known as civic history. This view says that the only purpose of history is to increase one's love of and pride in country. Civic history then, focuses on the grand ideals and accomplishments of a civilization, while minimizing any portions of history that might detract from a positive picture. Though we are engaged in this debate here in this country, I want to use an example that will raise blood pressure a little less, so I will use Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is engaged in this debate as we speak. On the one hand you have those who want to focus on civic history, telling the story of the brave revolutionaries who defeated the white regime of what was known as Rhodesia; then distributed land to black farmers and created a new nation. On the other hand, you have those who want to tell the scientific history of Mugabe's dictatorship, cronyism, hunger, political oppression and inflation that reached over a thousand-percent per year. So, which should they teach? Which should we as Christians teach? The answer, if we look to the Biblical writers, is both; both because it takes both to lead to repentance and it takes repentance to be faithful followers of Jesus.

To understand the need for repentance, we need to unpack the concept of repentance. Repentance is a process that begins with regret and ends with return. The repentance process begins with the emotion of regret. It may be that most of you have said something that you wish you had not said; or have done something that you wish you had not done. Or maybe you didn't do something you know you ought to have done or didn't speak up when you should have. And because of those actions or inactions, you have caused hurt or allowed hurt to continue and thus caused regret. If you have not, I wish I was you, because in my life there are those moments when I should have spoken up but didn't. Or words came out of my mouth that I wished to instantly take back but couldn't. They caused me regret and this kind of regret is step one in the process of repentance. Step two in the process of repentance is returning. To understand this, we should remember that God has set before us a path that leads to life. God has set before us a path in and through Jesus Christ that leads us to love God and neighbor. When we do things that we regret it means we have left the path. We have wandered off. What regret is intended to do then, is to cause us to return to the path. It reminds us of how far off course we are. And if we

are to engage in this practice then we need to remember both the bad from which we want to turn and the good to which we desire to return.

This act of remembering both the bad and the good, that which we regret and that to which we desire to return, are each part of the great Biblical story. We can see this in our morning's texts. In our Old Testament text, we can find scientific history as we hear the prophet telling the people to remember where they fell short, where they failed and for which they ought to feel regret. *"The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant...desolation is left in the city. The gates are battered to ruin."* What is being described is the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The writer makes it clear that this destruction has come not simply as a result of political miscalculation, but because the people failed to remember. They failed to remember that they were the people who were to desire life and not death, mercy and not cruelty, humility and not arrogance. This is history intended to evoke regret and encourage return.

The Biblical writers also offer us the other kind of history, civic history. They ask us to remember those who showed us the way to faithfulness in order to encourage us to return to the path God has set before us. They want us to remember the heroes. This is the purpose of the portion of Hebrews we read this morning. *"And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection."* Let me be clear that none of these heroes was perfect. They were all flawed human beings like us, and yet, in faith, they accomplished great things for God and God's people. And their lives remind us of what we can do when we return to the way of God. They help us to remember what is possible through repentance.

This Lent, the forty days leading up to Easter, is intended to be a time for self-reflection leading to repentance. My challenge for us all for this week is to examine our own lives and find those moments of regret and return that we might repent and more faithfully follow Jesus with each passing day.