

**THE HOMILY OF HIS BEATITUDE, METROPOLITAN JONAH  
GIVEN AT ST. SERAPHIM CATHEDRAL  
SUNDAY, JANUARY 12, 2009**

*Matthew 4:12-17*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is a great joy to be back in Dallas

We hear in the gospel this morning how the Lord Jesus having been baptized, having gone into the desert, having considered His calling, His ministry, began to preach in the same words of St John the Baptist, “repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” For us also, is a kind of announcement, as it were, (I always take it that way) of that season of repentance which is coming up, the season of Great Lent which is coming fast upon us in about six weeks. Things are already beginning to gear up with this announcement – “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

But what is the goal of that repentance? It is to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is to attain to all the measure of the stature of the fullness of God. It is to receive and accept the revelation of God as Father, by the gift of His Son - because it is only by Christ having chosen us and revealed the Father to us that we know Him.

But what is this process of repentance? This is so important for us to understand because there are also traps along the way. There are not only temptations – and temptations are actually a good thing – temptations are what try our faith. That is where the “rubber meets the road” because it is not only a trying of our faith but also of our very identity. It is not about the particular object of temptation whatever it may be. It is rather “am I going to indulge myself in this or that thing, that object or that behavior – and if I do is that a betrayal of my Christianity? Is that a betrayal of who I am as a Christian?” So, by being confronted by temptations, it is a good thing because we are strengthened in our faith, strengthened in our identity. The Fathers have this saying, “without temptation there is no salvation.” So, we work out our salvation through our temptations. And even the Lord, Jesus Christ is the image of that for us.

The Lord’s preaching was repentance. In fact, in another place He says, “go and proclaim the Gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins in My Name to the whole world.” It is through repentance that we are able to accept the forgiveness of our sins. It is through repentance that we are able to forgive others. And it is through repentance that our souls are healed.

I think our culture is one that does not understand repentance. Repentance, I would say, has three main levels. The first level, the most basic level, is feeling sorry for your actions. And that is a good place to start. We have to realize that our actions

hurt other people. Our actions hurt ourselves. Our sins and transgressions are actually self-destructive behavior and they tear down and hurt other people. And so, when we begin repentance, when we begin the process of repentance, we have to look at ourselves and say, "Look at what I am doing? How can I be doing this? It is no good. I have to stop this because it is hurting me and other people." That is a very important place to start. But the trap is precisely to get stuck in a kind of self-pity, which is a vicious cycle, vicious circle –and we beat ourselves up with our self-pity. And that is not repentance.

Beating ourselves up and feeling miserable is not really repentance. Why? Because we are still focused on our sin – and, a very important aspect of this is that sometimes we will get into this cycle where we are saying " I am not going to do it, I am not going to do it, I am not going to do it, and we do it." Why? Because we are obsessing about it. We have not put our sin behind us, put it out of our mind. All we are doing is thinking about it. So that does not help. It is another trap.

So we have to get through those first traps, those first temptations to get to the next level – and the next level is to begin to realize that our sins separate us from God – that our sin damages our relationship with God. What this presumes, of course, is that we have a relationship with God - that we are aware of our relationship with God. And really, these three levels are three levels of consciousness- three levels of awareness of God. So on the first level we don't have a lot of awareness of God – we know we hurt ourselves and we hurt each other. On the second level we are aware that we damage our relationship with God, and one of the traps is that (we think) God hates me because of my sin. That God is angry with me because of my sin. That God won't love me because of my sin. And you know what? This is delusion.

God's love for us is absolute. His forgiveness of us is absolute. He always stands with open arms waiting to receive us and embrace us if only we will turn to Him and ask forgiveness. And, to a great extent, - there is another trap on this level – that we think that God will not forgive us because we refuse to forgive ourselves. We refuse to accept forgiveness of our sins and we think, "Oh, I am so bad, I am so bad, I am so hopeless" and here again we get stuck in self-pity. Only our self-pity is a little bit more sophisticated – and instead it is guilt.

Well, guilt is a trap. And guilt itself is a sin. Why? Because all we are doing is going over and over and over again in our heads what we did and how bad we are and all this other stuff that keeps us chained down. It is another vicious cycle because it holds us down and it keeps us focused on sins and our self-pity and on ourselves, on our ego. So guilt is a trap.

Now there is "healthy" guilt – it is very important for us to be aware of our sins, to be mindful of our sins, to be mindful of how they hurt one another, to be mindful of how we break off our relationship with God, but what is most important is that when we repent we are repairing our relationship with God and we have to accept that forgiveness from God. This can be very hard sometimes because we get stuck in

habitual sins. Sometimes we get stuck because we have committed a really big sin, or we have been victimized. And this is another trap, because if someone has really sinned against us, really hurt us, we can then be stuck in resentment, in anger, in bitterness, and we feel self-justified because “they” really were wrong to do that to us. But, it is a trap because unless or until we forgive those people who hurt us and against those we have resentments, this keeps us stuck in ourselves. It prevents us from actualizing that fullness of relationship with God because we still have this anger and hatred and bitterness in our hearts.

So, when we repent on this second level, having begun to have an awareness of God in our lives, knowing that relationship with God is impaired by our sins, and indeed, not only by our sins but sometimes by our whole way of life – we turn to God in repentance and open ourselves and surrender to His mercy, to His judgment, whatever it will be – confident in His love, confident in His forgiveness – so that our souls might be healed.

Truly, this is the place where the greatest aspect of the healing of our soul happens because when we repent like that what are we doing? We are filled with divine grace. We are filled with divine energy, which comes in and heals and cauterizes and, unfortunately also exposes more things that we are to repent of. Ah, that is part of it!

But this whole process we go through of our purification is the process of repentance but it is also the process of our illumination and our enlightenment – the process of our deification. We have to clear out all the darkness and the garbage, clear out all the anger and the bitterness and the resentment and the self-hatred and the self-loathing and the self-blame, and all this other stuff before we can open ourselves to God on a deeper level.

And, there is a deeper level. And that deeper level comes when having cleared away so much of this stuff, we have this awareness of God that permeates our entire life – every aspect of our life, every aspect of our being, every relationship, every thought is illumined by that presence of God. We might think, “What does repentance mean in that?” Well, by that time, we probably won’t be sinning a whole lot. Which is probably true. But repentance takes on a whole different meaning, because repentance really is not about feeling sorry for yourself or feeling guilty, and doing penance and all that stuff, that really is not what repentance means. Repentance means a transformation of your mind, a transformation of your consciousness. A transformation of your entire awareness – so that repentance itself becomes the very context of every aspect of our life because it becomes the description of what we constantly do – which is constantly focus on God, constantly turn toward God – and when we realize that we have lost our focus on God, we turn back again, and He is there and He has not forgotten us and He does not hate us and He is not angry with us. He is there!

And that is why when we sing in, the upcoming season of the Fast - what we sing about is the "joy of repentance." It truly is a joy! It is not a joy if you are just feeling sorry for yourself and immersed in guilt. I mean, who needs that, right? Who needs that? But, rather, the real depths of repentance is this transformation of our whole lives and our heart, in God, by God, so that illumined by the Grace of God, by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, we behold God in the depths of our being. That knowledge of God as Father, which is nothing but our experience of shared relationship, of sonship, with the Father. And this is that repentance that permeates the entirety of our being that says, with joy, "repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." `