

Third Sunday of Easter

“What Does This Mean?” An Easter Catechism Lesson

Acts 2:14a, 36-42

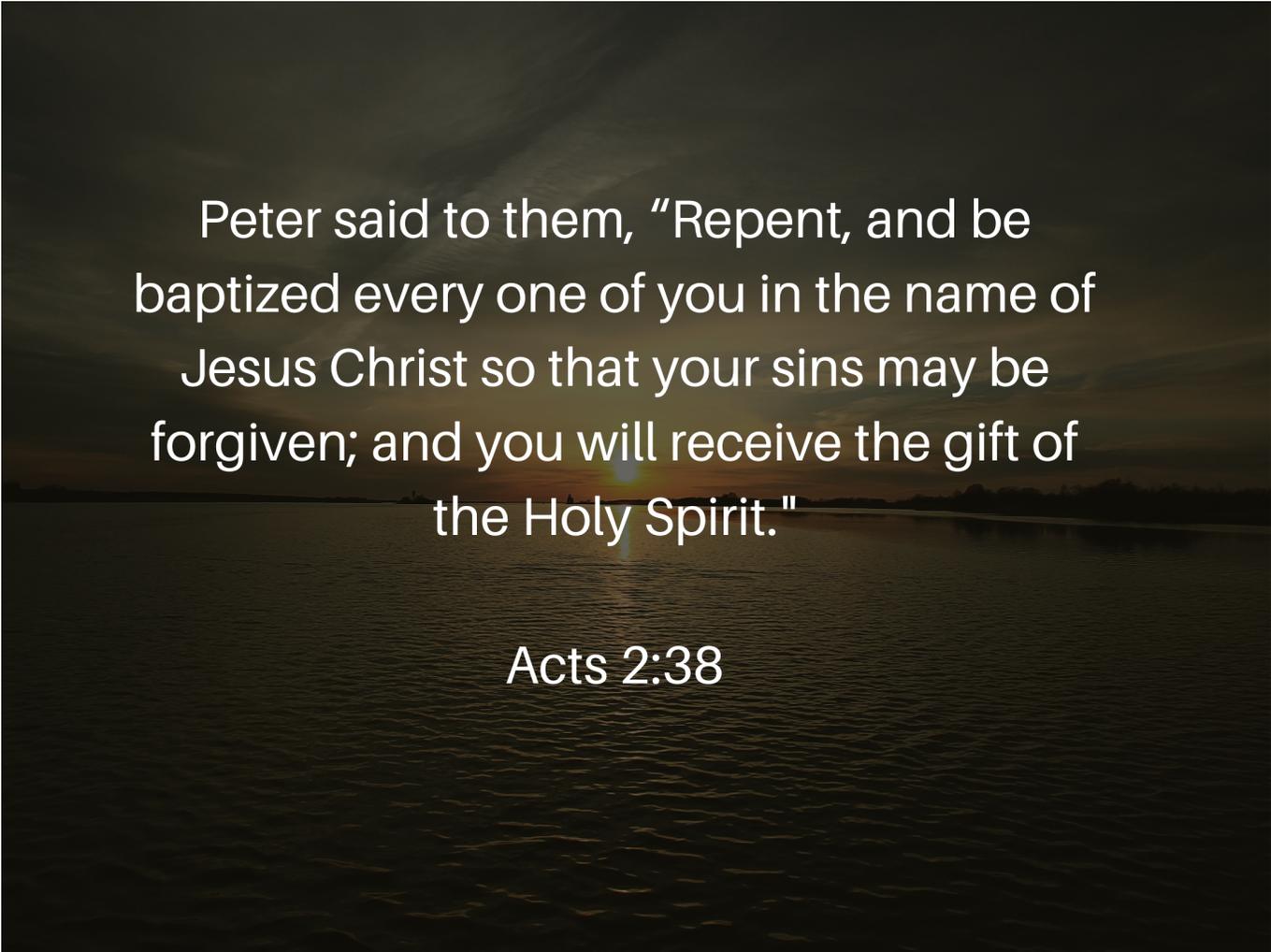
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Analysis by Chris Repp

14a Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them.

36 Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” 38 Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.



Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 2:38

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Repentance is a change of heart and attitude, a bending back into shape. A quick reading of this passage makes repentance seem like a condition for receiving the promise. A deeper reading shows that only the promise and the work of the Spirit can lead to repentance.

DIAGNOSIS: Doomed

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Death-bringing

Our pericope is cut out of the Pentecost story, the beginning of which we won't get for another five weeks. The bulk of this text is a reaction to Peter's sermon, which in turn is a response to the crowd's reaction (!) to witnessing the tongues of flame

descending on the disciples who then begin to speak in the various languages represented by those present. So a reaction to a reaction to a reaction. The first, the crowd's reaction to the spectacle, was twofold: some said, "they're drunk," but others asked, "what does this mean?" Now, that's a question with a pedigree in gospel-promoting circles. It's the repeated question of the catechism. What does it mean that Jesus' disciples are now receiving power from on high? It means that the crowds have killed an innocent man. They listened to and enthusiastically supported the voices calling for Jesus' crucifixion, thinking that they were saving themselves and their nation from his corrupting influence. What this means is that they are finding themselves "on the wrong side of history," as we like to say, or that they've "backed the wrong horse," to paraphrase Annas in Jesus Christ Superstar.

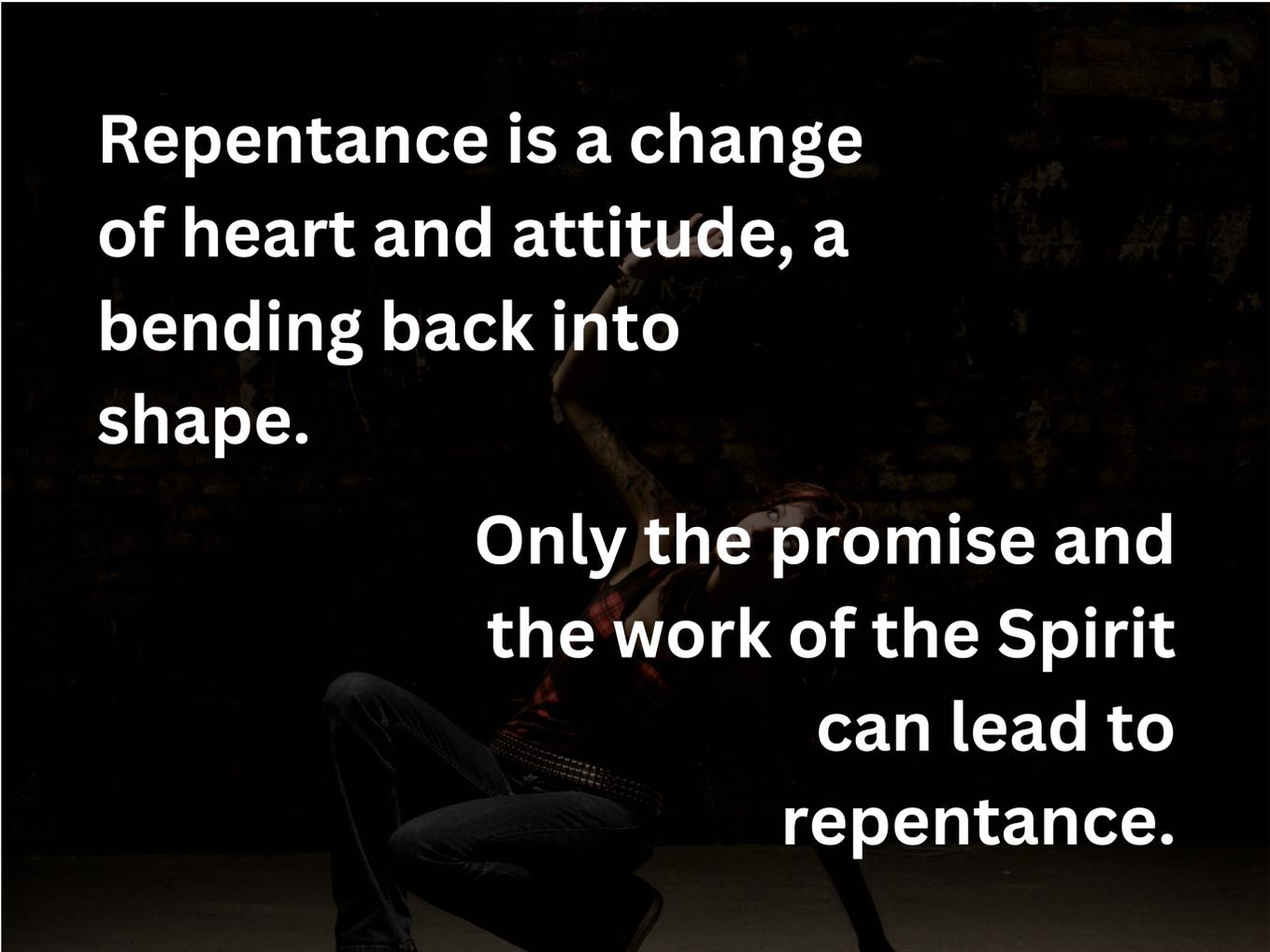
Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Crooked

What would make them do that, execute an innocent man? Peter tells them: they belong to a corrupt generation. The Greek word for corrupt here is scolios, from which we get the medical term scoliosis, where a person's spine is bent to one side instead of being straight. The Latin would be "perverse," which shows up in our translation of Isaiah 53, a key text for Luke's understanding of the crucifixion: "By a perversion of justice he was taken away."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Doomed

What this ultimately means for the crowd is that this is a Greek tragedy unfolding before their eyes, and they are the protagonists. They thought they were doing good, but because of their crookedness they have perverted justice and unwittingly killed God's Messiah. And when you have made God your enemy, only doom awaits. The final words of Sophocles' famous tragedy

“Oedipus Rex” belong to the chorus: “no man should be considered fortunate until he is dead.”



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of heart and attitude, a
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**Only the promise and
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Repentance

PROGNOSIS: Promised

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Promised

Or maybe that's not the ultimate meaning, because this tragedy does not have the usual tragic ending. And that's because a very unfortunate dead man—Jesus—now has a future. Again, Isaiah 53, which we just read in Holy Week, needs to be borne in mind here. What this means is that the unfortunate man's death has borne the sin of many in order to make them righteous, or restore

their fortunes, you might say. And his resurrection and ascension bring a life-giving Spirit. That's a promise, available to all in baptism. It is salvation from crookedness and corruption.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Straight

Luke brought this up once before, way back at the beginning of his Gospels, when John the Baptist announced that Isaiah's prophecy (chapter 40) was going to be fulfilled in Jesus in this way: "the crooked [scolia] shall be made straight." Not only does baptism save us by delivering us the promise, but it also leads to a change in us. Repentance is the fancy term. Repentance is a change of heart and attitude, a bending back into shape. A quick reading of this passage makes repentance seem like a condition for receiving the promise. A deeper reading shows that only the promise and the work of the Spirit can lead to repentance.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Life-Giving

Okay, so now what does this really mean, ultimately? It means life, life as God meant for us to live it. It means devotion to the apostles' teaching (like digging into the Scriptures in our weekly text studies?) It means fellowship, hanging out with fellow promisees, gathering with them around the Word and the sacraments, and breaking bread and praying with them. And then, of course, it means being led by the Spirit into the world as conduits of the promise to all.