

SERMON
2nd Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2007

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we encounter a man named John. As we walk down toward the banks of the river, we hear him screaming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” Repent! Repent! But what does it mean to repent?

Well, the Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. Meta means “to change or shift,” and noia means “perspective.” It literally means a change in the way one views things. To repent does not only mean saying that we’re sorry. It means that we are going to genuinely change and mend our ways – to turn in a new direction.

You see, the repentance that John was preaching goes beyond saying we’re “sorry.” Sorry is what we are if we go to the store and bring home the wrong kind of pizza.

To repent is better understood by the phrase, “a contrite heart.” This is a heart that finds its present condition unacceptable. It is a heart that seeks real and substantial change – a heart that is always prepared for the coming of the Christ.

The question John puts before the people living in the Jordan valley and the question that people in each generation must ask is: What are those areas in our lives that need purifying? Where are the places where we have gone astray?

Where do we find it hard to follow the path God has set before us? Where does our indifference to injustice and oppression stand as roadblocks to God’s rule on earth?

That is why each year about this time we hear the voice of John the Baptist calling to us from the wilderness. He comes out of nowhere, out of the desolation of loneliness and hunger.

He comes from a place where there are no crowds, no hustle and bustle, no sumptuous turkey and stuffing, candy canes and chocolates. No Santa Clause and missile toe, no chestnuts roasting over an open fire.

Imagine going to the mall, and standing in line so that your child can get his or her picture taken with Santa Claus. But when you get to the front of the line, you don’t see a big jolly man with a red suit and a white beard.

Instead you see a scrawny man with a leathery face, and a long, messy, Middle-Eastern beard. He’s wearing some type of brown animal skin around his loins. He’s eating grasshoppers and honey.

Meet John the Baptist, labeled by Jesus as “the greatest of all the prophets.” “Repent!” he cries, “prepare the way of the Lord.”

Look at it this way. Picture yourself getting out of bed in the morning and walking into the bathroom. The first thing you do is look in the mirror. After getting over the initial shock at what you look like, you begin the daily beauty routine. You attempt to repair the damage that was done overnight.

This is an essential part of the beginning of our day. We don't just get up, throw some clothes on and head out the door without even looking into the mirror. At work or school, we don't say; "sorry about how I appear, I didn't even bother to look in the mirror this morning."

So it is with repentance. Repentance forces us to look in the mirror – to see all of the clutter that is there. We see the blemishes of sin. We see the disarrayed hair of inappropriate behavior. We see the scraggly whiskers or caked-on make-up of broken relationships.

Most of us would no doubt make a decision right then and there to start the repairs, to do something about what we see. Of course, some would simply go back to bed.

But John does not want us to go back to bed; but rather to begin the process of repenting, of changing our ways. And just like our morning rituals, repentance is not a one-time event. It is a daily action. For we "die daily to our sin", as Luther reminds us.

Richard Jensen says it most powerfully. He says; "the repentant person comes before God saying, 'I can't do it myself God. Kill me and give me new life. You buried me in baptism. Bury me again today. Raise me to new life.'"

You see, again, repentance means to actually change – to be transformed. In Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch paraphrase of the Bible, he uses the illustration of the caterpillar-butterfly image to clarify the real meaning of repentance.

"The ugly caterpillar crawls along, in the dirt with the warm sun shining upon him. Then he climbs by instinct out onto a limb of a tree and weaves a cocoon all around himself.

The sun continues to bathe him with warmth and when the time is right, something wonderful happens to him. The protective shell begins to crack and break open with new life. He emerges changed – changed into a new form to face a whole new world."

Do any of you remember what this is called from your 9th grade biology class? It's called *metamorphosis*. Metamorphosis means to change in form or substance. It can also mean a complete change of character or appearance.

Now, what did I say was the Greek word for repentance? Metanoia. Metamorphosis, metanoia. It is part of the same root word.

John is calling us to look beyond what is, to what we can become. It is not just a matter of saying we are sorry for our misdeeds. He is calling us to become that caterpillar – to have a new birth-day in Christ. Therefore, each day as we remember our baptism, we are indeed born anew. However, new birth has its consequences.

The author Andrew Greeley wrote about a man who was a bit of a bum. He was talented and successful. But he neglected his wife and his children. He neglected his work and his friends – his community and his colleagues. He drank too much, lost his temper too often, and was cruel too many times.

Then one day he had a tremendous religious experience and was totally transformed. He experienced a new birth. He became a good and loving husband. He became a generous and sympathetic father. He was now a diligent worker, a loyal friend, and a dedicated member of his community. He was sober and kind. He was patient and gentle.

At first, everyone rejoiced in the change. They said that they had known all along that deep down inside, he was really a good man.

But then they realized that the change was for real, and that to continue their relationships with him, they would have to change also. He ended up losing his wife and his family. He lost his job and his friends.

Now before you say, “well, I don’t have any of these problems, I don’t think I really need to change or repent,” hear a word of caution. John said to such people, “You brood of vipers!”

You see, there are two types of sin that call for repentance. There are sins of commission and sins of omission. For some reason, we only seem to focus on the sins of commission. We talk about “committing a particular sin.” Things such as like stealing, murder or sexual immorality. Some Christians would add things such as drinking, smoking, dancing, and going to the movies. Therefore, we can go right down the line and justify ourselves for not committing any of these sins.

But listen to this. Jesus actually talked more about sins of omission than sins of commission. Remember his words; “I was hungry and you did not feed me. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was naked and you gave me no clothing. I was in prison and you did not visit me.”

You see, the lack of speaking out and acting against the poverty and injustices in this world is no less of a sin than stealing or murder. For when some people and nations take more than their share of resources and leave others with little or nothing, and nobody speaks out or does anything, that is a sin of omission.

When people and nations use the poor and oppressed of the world for their own gain, and nobody speaks out or does anything about it, that is a sin of omission.

When people and nations use violence and overwhelming military power to satisfy their own desires, and nobody speaks out or does anything to stop it, that is a sin of omission. And John says; “you brood of vipers.” And Jesus weeps.

As we journey through this Advent season, we are forced to struggle with these words of John the Baptist. We are challenged to raise our voices and move into action for the cause of love and peace. It would be easy for us to just forget about all of this repentance stuff and move quickly into the comfort of a baby in a manger.

But as we struggle with the repentance in our own lives, as well as what it means to repent as a community and as a nation, we will also discover hope. Because that is where hope starts. There can be no hope unless we admit our need to repent. Just like a drug addict cannot have hope unless he or she first admits the addiction.

We cannot have hope for a Savior until we admit that we need a Savior. And that Savior has come to us in the past as a light unto the world – Christ crucified for you and for me. That Savior is with us now guiding us and encouraging us through his Spirit. And that Savior will come to us in a new and glorified way in the future.

Along with John, we are not worthy to carry his sandals. Instead, we continue to live a life of repentance. Not as a duty demanded by the law, but rather as a joy in response to God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. For then, Advent is not a time of fear and trembling, but instead is a time of hope and anticipation

Like we prayed a short time ago: “we come, we cry, we watch, we wait, we long for you. Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.