

December 4, 2022

True Repentance

by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! This is the second Sunday of Advent, or in the secular world, the third month of Christmas decorations in stores. This year on the day before Halloween I walked down one store's seasonal aisle and one side was Halloween and the other side was all Christmas items. It felt a little bit like a battle was going to take place, as if a light up jack-o'-lantern was going to leap from the shelves and fight it out with some singing Christmas trees. There was a palpable tension. I felt it. I didn't linger.

The scriptures can feel a little like that today as well. We love Christmas, but how about Advent? I don't mean the children's pageant. I don't mean the singing and candles of the Christmas Eve service (though it was magic last year as it began to snow). We love Christmas, the decorations the special foods, and the gifts. But what about Advent?

We usually characterize the weeks leading up to Christmas as hectic or stressful, or too much. And by contrast we characterize the season of Advent as one of anticipation, of waiting. Of the deep winter quiet and dark, where God is waiting to greet us at the still center. When I hear people talk about Advent, they make it sound like a peaceful weekend retreat, or maybe a self-care day at the spa where we can just get a moment for ourselves.

Advent might be all of these things. Yes, we do need a quiet center to the rush and hubbub of the holiday season. Yes, we do need something to look forward to in all of this dark and cold. But Advent is also much more than this.

Advent is a call to the people of God, that would be you and me in the pews, to really take stock of ourselves. To take a long, hard, look at our lives, our actions, our thoughts and behaviors. John the Baptist isn't saying, "Head to Kohl's now for our door-buster event!" John the Baptist is saying REPENT. Repent, like a street preacher shouting from a corner that we all cross the street to avoid. Repent like an Evangelical preacher calling out the congregation's sins.

We think we know what that word means. The dictionary defines repent, "to feel or express regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin." Or maybe, to view or think of something we did with deep regret. "Sure, we all have things we regret. But we can't change the past," we think. "We are good people," we assure ourselves. "That kind of language isn't for us Lutherans." we say.

But that isn't what John the Baptist meant when he was yelling REPENT along the Jordan River. The Greek word in the gospel of Matthew is so much more. The Greek word is **metanoéo** which means to change one's mind or to change one's purpose. Let me say that again, metanoéo means to change one's mind—to literally have a new idea or perspective—or to change one's purpose, that is to have a whole new reason for living.

Repenting, for John the Baptist, isn't about feeling bad about the past things we already feel bad about. It isn't rehashing old sins where we feel guilt and shame to feel more guilt and shame.

Repenting isn't thinking about all the mistake we've made and worrying about going to hell or being punished by God. Repenting isn't listing all of the things we regret doing, or the things we regret we didn't do—missed opportunities—and feeling self-pity.

Metanoeo, repentance isn't about making us feel shame, guilt, self-pity, or fear. That isn't the end result God or John the Baptist is looking for. True repentance may use those feelings in us, but they aren't the desired result. Not the end. Not what repentance is for. True repentance means that our lives must be changed. Our minds and ways of thinking are changes. That we will be given a new outlook on life, a new way of living. Those bad feelings might help us open up, but we can't make the change by ourselves.

How successful have you been, by yourself, at changing your mind and purpose on your own? I'll let you think about that for a minute. I might check back with you in February to see how your New Year's resolutions are turning out. The honest truth is that we cannot change our minds or our hearts on our own. As they say in certain circles, you can't use a broken mind to think your way out of a problem. If we could, we wouldn't need other people. We wouldn't need God. We could save ourselves. We cannot save ourselves.

The daily news shows us we cannot save ourselves. Not on our own power. Not without God's help.

Looking to the text today, who is John the Baptist angry with in the gospel today—well maybe everyone because we imagine him shouting like a street preacher—but let's look at the passage again, in verses 7-10. ⁷“But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit **worthy of repentance**. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious people of John's day. The churchgoers. Us! Not the people outside of these walls this Sunday morning. Not, the people in prison. Not those caught in a cycle of addiction and using drugs right now while I preach. Not the atheists. Not the drag queen asleep in bed recovering from their drag show on Saturday night. Not the parent screaming at their children in anger in the store parking lot this weekend. John is not condemning any of these people in the gospel today.

John the Baptist is calling you and I, us hearing these words in church, to repent this Sunday morning. To allow God to change our minds and our hearts. To allow God to literally give us new ways of seeing the world and a new reason for living.

How terrifying. How impossible!

Now, you might be saying to yourself, “Intern Pastor Jory, I've been Lutheran all my life and I know just a little bit more than you.” And it is true. You do know more than I do about being Lutheran or more about Christ Lutheran Church, or living in Whatcom County. I fully admit

many of you know more than me, have more experience, have deeper perspectives. Thank God for that. My brain is a wild place and I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

But thankfully for you and me, in the gospel today, John the Baptist, Jesus this Living Word of God is the one doing the calling. Not me. I am just repeating the words here. You can read them for yourself in any bible. REPENT. Metanoeo.

But what does repentance look like? The other readings today are here to help us with that. From psalm 72 today, "that the mountains may bring prosperity to the people" (repeat) or "defend the needy among the people, rescue the poor, and crush the oppressor." (repeat) "may righteous flourish; and let there be an abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more." ...flourishing righteousness until the moon shall be no more. What hope! What a promise!

But let's not just rely on the psalm, let's look at the reading from Isaiah today too, in verse 4, "but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." Isaiah too confirms what the psalmist declares. Repentance, true righteousness from God means justice for all, equity for all, enough for all, peace—for all.

In Isaiah and the psalm, the whole world has undergone a metanoeo, a repentance and all of the old ideas, the old ways of doing things, all the pain and suffering and discord passes away with true repentance. It has all passed away when true repentance arrives. And not because we all see the same, look the same, act the same, or think the same. That lion and that bear don't have the same outlook on life. That leopard and that young goat don't have the same opinions. The nest of adders and that child don't agree with one another. But they are at peace with one another. As Isaiah declares, on the mountain of righteousness, that mountain of repentance, that place where our minds and our lives are changed by God and made new, "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." You will not hurt or destroy another person. You, yourself, will not be hurt or destroyed in that new place. In the place of repentance where God is at the center.

God's welcome isn't just a welcome. The Loving One's welcome is also a liberation. When the Holy One truly embraces us, transformation takes place. Our God is not a God of yesterday, the God of Christmas past in a manger. The Merciful One is also the God of today without conflicts, our difficulties, our sufferings and business. The Loving One is also the God of tomorrow, of which we can only hope and worry about.

Our God is the God of that holy mountain, that mountain of true repentance. The Loving One is the one calling us today to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our minds and our heart, because we cannot do it on our own. By our own power. Through our own effort.

Please pray with me. Let's close our eyes for a minute, and just breath. You people watching this online, please join us as well, you are with us too. Please pray with me.

God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, you promise us a future on your holy mountain. A place of true repentance with you at the center.

Please repeat these next parts after me, or silently in your hearts.

Help me believe in that promise. Help me to hope in that promise. Come with your Spirit and stir up my heart. Help me to repent, Loving One, change my thoughts, my feelings, and my life. Holy One, draw me close to you. Help me to do the work and to live in a way that ends hurt and sorrow for all people. Bring all of us to your holy mountain where hurt and sorrow is no more. We ask this in your Son's name, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amen? Amen!