

“Call to Repent”

The scene takes place in the desolate wilderness of ancient Judea, about 30 years after the birth of Jesus. In that barren desert someone suddenly appears who creates quite a stir. He looks like an Old Testament prophet. This man wears clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist – a description very much like that of the prophet Elijah. He lives a rugged, austere life, eating locusts and wild honey (honey isn’t bad, but locusts – yuk!).

Who is he? He’s John the Baptist (John the Baptizer). John is fulfilling a prophecy of Isaiah, that God would send someone to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. Matthew 3:3 says, “This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’”.”

John preaches that the kingdom of God (or the reign of God) is breaking into this world. This present world is marked by evil and suffering and death and is starting to pass away; the New World marked by peace and love and goodness is now dawning.

How do we get ready for this seismic shift as kingdom breaks in? How do we prepare ourselves to receive this Deliverer for whom devout Jews have longed? Answer can be summed up in one word: **repent**. Matthew writes, “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matthew 3:1-2).

John the Baptist was not the only one to emphasize the importance of repentance. Old Testament prophets called on the people to repent. They often used phrases like “mend your ways”, “turn to the Lord”, “return to your God.” Jesus Himself began His preaching ministry echoing this theme of repentance: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14-15).

Today is the beginning of Advent. The word “Advent” means “coming” or “arrival”. The season of Advent is this 4 week period prior to Christmas where we prepare again for the birth of Jesus. *Most of the world isn’t into Advent.* We want to jump right into Christmas. (Christmas music is already being played on the radio. The Hallmark Channels have been playing Christmas movies since last Valentine’s Day - actually only since late October!).

But for serious Christian believers, Advent can be a 4 week stretch where we prepare ourselves spiritually to once again celebrate the birth of our Savior. *A big part of our preparation centers on this word “repent”.*

What does it mean to repent? It means to *turn around, to change*. One definition of repentance is “to be deeply grieved over sins and willing to change”. Another is “a decisive change of mind and heart and direction in life.” It means turning from sin and turning to God, that we stop doing wrong and start doing what’s right. It means giving up the self-focused life and doing God’s will.

Repentance is more than just feeling sorry that we have done wrong. Feeling sorry for our sins is *part* of repentance, but it's not all that's needed. Let's say I kind of make fun of you and cut you down, and I really offend you and hurt you. I feel ashamed and sorry. But the next time I see you, I do it again. And I feel sorry about it. But I do it again later on. Is that repentance? No it isn't.

Sometimes we are sorry, not because we did wrong, but because we got caught! Some years ago the Philadelphia Eagles signed Michael Vick as a quarterback. Prior to that he had been arrested for sponsoring dog fights, and cruelty to animals. He served time in prison. When he was signed by the Eagles at the beginning of the season he held a press conference. He seemed to be sorry as he spoke of the crime he had committed. But there were some sports commentators who suggested his apology was scripted, wooden, and that perhaps he really didn't regret the horrible things he had done, but was just sorry that he got caught! (We don't know his heart, but there is a difference between being sorry for what we do and being sorry that we got caught).

Genuine repentance always is marked by a change in behavior. John the Baptizer made this clear: "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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance'" (Matthew 3:7-8). To "bear fruit worthy of repentance" means that this inward change and turning around is expressed in practical outward behaviors – we act differently! St. Ambrose said, "True repentance is to cease from sin."

Repentance isn't something a lot of people are into today! Our society is increasingly secular. God and God's laws are being replaced by moral relativism. When we lose a sharp edge between right and wrong, and a belief that these are divinely given statutes, there is not much motivation for repentance. Even many Christians shy away from repentance. We want church services to be positive, upbeat. Being sorry, grieving our failures, and admitting we need to change, doesn't fit that happy mold.

A holocaust survivor by the name of Herman Rosenblat wrote a book called *Angel at the Fence*. In this book he told of meeting his wife on opposite sides of a concentration camp fence, a sub-camp of Buchenwald. He wrote how she sneaked him apples and bread. His story endeared him to millions of people. He and his wife Roma appeared twice on the Oprah Winfrey show. It was a true feel-good story. Then scholars began to research this information and found that the facts refuted his account of what happened. It didn't happen. He made it up! Appearing on ABC's "Good Morning America" program, Rosenblat acknowledged inventing the story, but said he has no regrets, and would tell the story again given another chance. He said his wife went along with the story "because she loves me."

Sometimes, instead of repenting, we can rationalize, make excuses. I once watched a TV program where reporters went undercover to expose jewelers in New York City who were putting liquid filler in rubies and sapphires. They went to 5 places and purchased gemstones, including Tiffanies and Macy's. All 5 were guilty of adding filler to gemstones. All 5 denied doing this. One person in the jewelry section of one of the stores said they couldn't earn a living

if they turned everyone away by telling them there was filler being used. So, in place of repentance there was rationalizing, making excuses for wrong behavior.

The words of John the Baptist set a worthy tone for the beginning of Advent: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near...”. The only way that you and I can have God in our life and receive all the blessings that God wants humanity to have is through the door of repentance!

Repentance is a necessary step for us to be saved, to become a Christian believer. After Jesus was resurrected and returned to the heavenly Father, on the day of Pentecost Simon Peter preached a sermon proclaiming that Jesus was the Savior and Messiah (Deliverer). People listening were cut to the core, and said, “What shall we do?” Peter’s reply was this: “*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 2:37-38). If we want our sins to be forgiven and have a place in God’s forever family, we need to repent and turn from our sinful, self-centered way of living.

There are people – maybe some of us – who think this repentance stuff is for “really bad people”. If we were raised in a Christian family, or we’ve been in church a long time, or we live a pretty decent life, we don’t have to repent. John the Baptist thought otherwise! His words were spoken to Pharisees and Sadducees, *religious leaders* – who figured that *they* didn’t have to personally repent because they were part of the chosen people, Abraham’s descendants, religious to the hilt! Listen to what John says in response: “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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do 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. Even 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”’ (Matthew 3:7-10).

Jesus Himself underscored the fact that *everybody* needs to repent if we’re to be saved and be part of God’s kingdom and family. Our Lord said this, “At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did”’ (Luke 13:1-5).

But repentance is also important once we become a Christian, if we are to progress in our walk with God. For most of us, our growth in Christ is not a steady, upward progression. It’s more uneven. There are periods when we are close to God, spiritually alive. But aren’t there also those times when the light of our faith burns low, we don’t feel close to God, and maybe we fall into certain bad habits, or stray into some serious sin. In our low times, the road to renewal and new vigor in the Christian life often begins in *repentance* – where we come clean before God, and recognize a need to change. Someone has said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Here is something I'd like for us to do. Let's take time out from this message for a period of silent meditation and soul searching. Let's each ask: Lord, in what ways do I need to repent? What are the things in my life that ought not to be there – things keeping me from living the full life in Christ. On the other hand, what are things that I haven't done, that I should have done or should be doing? Can we take some time now for prayer. Perhaps there is something in our relationship, the way we treat others (family, spouse, neighbor, co-worker). Or it's our devotional life – we've neglected a daily prayer time, or Bible reading. Maybe what we should confess is that our inner life is dried up, or we've given into some temptation, fallen into some habit, which we know is not worthy of God. Or we need to repent of an attitude that's negative and destructive. Whatever it is: Confess these things quietly to God. Ask for His help to begin to change. Decide in specific ways how you will begin to live differently.

Think of how different the world would be if people would repent! Think what would happen if Republicans and Democrats would quit trashing and demonizing those of the other party, and instead, admit: This is where I haven't been fair to the Republicans (to the Democrats), this is where I myself haven't told the whole truth, or where I haven't provided good leadership, this is where I've helped to fuel the hate and division we see in our country.

Think how different life would be in our families, if instead of pointing our finger at someone else in the family, and saying, "It's all his fault. It's all her fault," and if each would acknowledge where they are contributing to family turmoil. How many married couples have sat before me in therapy sessions, blaming the partner, justifying themselves. It's just a waste of time. Healing begins in marriages when each partner says, "This is what I'm doing to hurt our marriage, and this is how I need to change."

Think how different life would be in churches if we really repented. If pastors quit blaming parishioners for their church's failure to grow, and looked at their own leadership failings. If parishioners stopped blaming pastors for all the problems in the church. If we all were more real about our struggles and sins, and repented of our dishonesty and pretending. If we took responsibility for how our reluctance to change and wanting to hold on to old ways of doing things were keeping the church from thriving and growing.

Think what different world it would be if people would repent: If ISIS members turned from their violent ways, and those guilty of crimes didn't lie under oath, and business people who cheat customers would stop doing that. And on, and on.

John the Baptist, out there in the wilderness, prepared people to hear and receive Jesus and His message. And we prepare for His coming when we "Repent." "Change our ways." What a great way to begin Advent, and get ready for Christmas!

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