

“Get Ready By Repenting”

Today begins the season of Advent (4 weeks prior to Christmas). For Christian believers, this is meant to be a season of *preparation* – when we prepare ourselves once again for the coming of Jesus into the world, to receive and honor Him anew as Savior.

How can we prepare to once again celebrate His birth? John the Baptist set the tone a long time ago. He said we prepare for the Lord’s coming by *repentance*. "(John) went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Luke 3:3-4).

This rugged, wilderness preacher named John didn’t mince any words: "John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance'" (Luke 3:7-8a). John called the people poisonous snakes! Imagine being that blunt in our politically correct, woke time! He said the people needed to repent!

Pastor Joe Pennell writes of taking some background information about John the Baptist to an adult Sunday School class, then asking them to help him prepare a sermon on *repentance*. He asked members of the class, “If you were in my place, what would you say to this church about repentance?” (When I read this, I thought, what a great idea! If you were asked to preach a sermon about repentance in this church, what would you say?). Well...he says “blank, sheepish stares lined their faces.” One person said, “We are like the people of John’s day. We are so close to it that we can’t hear the message.” Another commented: “It’s like preaching to the choir. No one listens because we’ve been conditioned to hear something else.” Another in the class admitted, “Repentance is something we do in the corporate prayer (in our worship service) not something we do in our hearts.” *But John the Baptist said if we are going to be ready for the coming of Messiah, we must repent!*

What is repentance? What does it mean to repent? The word "repent" is a strong word in the Bible. It means to turn around, to change...a total makeover of your life – a turning from self, to God. It means to *think* differently, *act* differently, change the direction of our life. It's more than just *being sorry*...muttering a weak, "I'm sorry."

Often, I think, we can minimize the radical nature of repentance by seeing it as just kind of being sorry for the little smudges that mar our otherwise good character. “Oh, we’ve all got our faults.....” (haha). Or we may half joke about our vices...."I know, I cuss sometimes..." "I spend too much..." "I guess I'm a bit too critical..." "I get a little too flirty around men (women)..." So we can trivialize the urgency of our need to repent. I know a pastor, a real character. I heard about a message he put on church's outside sign board. This was back in the days when people “streaking” was the in thing. Remember that? The message he put up was picked up by the news media, and even appeared in Playboy magazine. The message was: “Streaker repent, for your end is in sight.”

In the Bible, repentance cuts much deeper than just having some minor regrets about our tiny

character flaws! Jesus once warned, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). Listen to John the Baptist's words: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin 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" (Luke 3:8-9).

John is talking to people who thought they were okay with God because they were Hebrews, and could trace their bloodline back to Abraham. They could get a free ride into God's kingdom because of their religious pedigree! This same kind of thing can happen today. A person can say, “My parents went to church.” “My sister teaches Sunday School.” “Uncle Floyd's second cousin's brother-in-law is a pastor! You know, faith runs in our family!” So... “I’m OK because of my religious connections...” John says, no way! You can’t live on the merits of someone else’s relationship with God. You can’t ride on the coattails of somebody else’s faith. We've got to do our own repenting and believing. "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:9).

We can look at repentance as it applies to two different situations. First, for the person who isn't yet a Christian. Whether we're neck deep in obvious sin and living a very decadent life – or whether we're nice, respectable people whose sins may be more subtle (like self-centeredness or self-righteousness), repentance is necessary if we're to be saved. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preaches a sermon. He talks about Jesus and how those hearing him had crucified Jesus. The people are cut to the heart and ask, “What shall we do?” Peter’s first word is “repent”: "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).

The Christian life begins with repentance: turning from our sins and a life centered in ourselves, turning to Christ, trusting Him to save us, beginning to make Christ the center of our life as our Savior and Lord.

But repentance is also necessary once we begin to follow Jesus. Just becoming a believer in Christ doesn't mean we suddenly cease to be human, or weak, or sinful. Things can creep or storm into our lives that distance us from God and other people, and even destroy our lives. Self-examination and daily repentance are spiritual disciplines necessary for us to maintain our relationship with Christ and to grow in Him.

John the Baptist says “Prepare the way of the Lord...get ready for the Lord’s coming...by *repenting!*” I love how practical and specific John is! "And the crowds asked him, 'What, then, should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages'" (Luke 3:10-14).

Even hated tax collectors came to be baptized. What shall we do? they asked. Don't collect any more than is required for you to collect (it was a common practice to collect more than they were supposed to). Soldiers asked John what they should do. He answered, "Don't extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation. Be content with your wages."

Let's suppose you were one of those people coming to John to be baptized, and you asked, "What should I do?" What would he have said? What specific things do you need to *stop doing* if you're going to please God more? What do you need to *start doing* if you're going to be a more disciplined follower of Jesus? (Sin isn't just the stuff we do that we shouldn't do; it's also that which we fail to do that we should do!)

In what ways do you and I need to change if we're going to be able to welcome Christ this Christmas with a purer heart? Maybe it's our anger or our temper; maybe it's our negative and critical attitude toward others; maybe it's the grudge we hold against someone, our unforgiving spirit, or the impure thoughts we have, or the self-centeredness that marks our life. Advent is an opportune time to do something about this. That could make this Christmas even more special!

Think of what might happen if the Church repents. On the one hand, churches that have become ingrown and self-centered, and failed to reach out to the world's needs. On the other hand churches that are at the forefront in working for social justice and welcoming everyone, but have little concern evangelistic concern to bring lost people to faith in Christ, or have become so liberal in their beliefs that they have strayed from the foundational doctrines of the faith.

Do you think our nation needs to repent, too? How about the political ads that we had to endure leading up to this last election? How much of the Spirit of Christ was seen in those ads? Do politicians of both parties need to repent of the way they act and govern? Do we the people need to put the brakes on the move towards secularism, and turn back to God? I think so.

What would happen if the news media would truly repent? I have never in my lifetime saw such bias, dishonesty and corruption in news reporting than we have today. Whether it is the progressive, liberal bias of all of the corporate mainstream media, or the conservative slant seen on networks like Fox and Newsmax. I honestly don't know where to go to get unbiased, objective reporting. Imagine how better off we all would be if those reporting the news would repent and change their ways!

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare people for the coming of Jesus: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight' (Luke 3:4). Then it goes on to say, "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6). *When we repent, it opens the door for God to save us!*

Some time ago I was watching a news program. In this segment they were highlighting a very pressing national problem. The reporter interviewed 2 religious leaders – one a Roman Catholic priest and the other an ultra-conservative preacher. The news reporter asked each man for his view on how to deal with the difficult situation. This fundamentalist minister answered (I

thought, with a rather self-righteous smirk), “I can sum up the answer in one word – repent.” I was embarrassed by this man’s attitude and answer – imagining that non-Christians would laugh at his simplistic remedy to this burning social problem.

The newscaster pushed him on his answer, and the priest kind of reacted by chiming in: Yes, repent – but these are complex issues, and we need to work together for solutions. That’s true, I thought – these are complex issues that we face and often there are no easy answers.

But you know, the more I thought about it, I believe truth was spoken by both of these men. The priest is right – issues of the nation and the world are complex, and beg for more than mere simplistic solutions. But in a sense this very conservative preacher spoke truth too – because the starting point for solving the world’s problems, the beginning point for each of us to live a better life and have better relationships, is that we *repent*. “I’m sorry God, for all the ways I’ve failed, where I’ve sinned. Search me, O Lord, and with your help, give me the power to change.”

We can begin now to get ready for Christmas by repenting!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
November 27, 2022*