

12-7-25 Sermon: “Jesus Is Coming, So...Repent” – Matthew 3:1-12

Into the hope, peace, joy, and love of the Advent season...comes John the Baptist. John is like the Debbie Downer of the Advent season, except that he also yells at you and calls you a snake. “You brood of vipers!” he cries, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance! Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire. Repent! Repent! Repent.”

We Presbyterians don’t talk about repentance very often; we shy away from John’s brand of hellfire and brimstone preaching. We’ll leave that to the Baptists, thank you very much, and the evangelicals. We’d rather stick to the affirming, feel-good parts of the gospel. It’s Christmas, after all; time to focus on all that is merry and bright. Let’s save that repentance stuff for Lent, how about, or at least put it off ‘til January, when we make resolutions and pretend (for a minute) that we’re trying to follow them.

Actually, what amazes me most about John the Baptist’s story is the report that all the people of Jerusalem and Judea went out to hear him preach and receive his baptism. What is it that is so compelling about this prophet, this preacher, this baptizer? Why are good, civilized people flocking to the wilderness to hear a guy who eats bugs rant about repentance and a coming time of judgment, about a God who will separate the wheat from the chaff?

Or maybe it’s not all that surprising. John the Baptist tells us something that deep down we know to be true. John preaches about a world that has gone wrong and needs to be made right. And we who live in this world, who see the headlines, know that humans are not exactly on a great trajectory these days. So perhaps there is something refreshing about a prophet who tells it like it is, who is not afraid to name sin when he sees it, who calls on the human race to turn our lives around. With all the talking heads out there, this guy may not be cheerful or even palatable, but at least we know he’s telling the truth.

Perhaps we even find some relief in hearing that God *does* expect better from us. That the world as it is right now is *not* the world as God intends it. That there is a moral order in our universe; that there are commandments and standards beyond “though shalt not get caught” and “the one who dies with the most stuff wins.” That even as our world trends toward chaos and nihilism, there is still a line between what is good and what is evil.

Of course, the problem with that line between good and evil is that it’s not a line in the sand; it’s a line in our hearts. Our tribal, polarized society loves to proclaim, “Evil’s over there! With *them!*”, but we who follow Jesus know there is more truth in the words of Russian Nobel Laureate Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, “The dividing line between good and evil cuts through every human heart.”

We go out to seek John in the wilderness, but when we give ourselves over to his message of repentance, we discover that the wilderness is within each of us.

John the Baptist speaks directly to us, we who know our own sinfulness, we who are painfully aware of our capacity to do harm and evil. And his message is this, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Repent. It’s a word we don’t hear very often outside of church contexts. And almost as important as what “repent” means is what repent does *not* mean. To repent is not to grovel in unending apologies. And despite what some flavors of Christianity may tell us, repentance is not about feeling guilty or wallowing in our worthlessness.

To repent is, literally, to turn. To turn around. Change our way. To stop going down one path and instead turn around and set out in a new direction.

Most of what I know about repentance, I learned in the rooms of a Twelve Step Program. The Twelve Steps don't use the word "repentance;" they use the word "amends." And that may be a more appropriate word for the process, because it implies taking restorative action to repair – *mend* – a situation and relationship.

The amends process is a concrete, practical microcosm of what theologians call "confession and repentance." I name what I have done wrong to the person I have harmed...confession. And then I tell them what I plan to do to differently going forward – or I ask them how *they* would like me to repair the harm...repentance. Notice that there is no room in the amends process for self-defense or for self-flagellation. The template is simply, "I did wrong and hurt you. I am sorry. Here's how I will change my behavior in the future."

And friends, let me tell you, as someone who is *really good* at carrying around unnecessary and unhelpful guilt, how liberating it is to acknowledge, name, and mend a harm I have done. It is, perhaps, a great irony of grace that the only thing that releases us from our own evil is to claim it, and then turn and do something different.

There's one more thing to say about the amends-repentance process. It's not a one-time thing. Repentance is a practice that keeps on going, that we repeat over and over again for the rest of our lives.

In the Twelve Steps, it's this pesky little Step #10, which reads, "We continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." In the Christian life, it's the reason we say a prayer of confession and receive an assurance of pardon every single week when we gather to worship. We return to the font, time and time again, because repentance is something we do over and over. A million different times in the course of a life, we are called to change our way, turn from the bad, and choose what is good.

This week I finished the latest installment in Louise Penny's series about Chief Inspector Armand Gamache and the quirky, lovable citizens of Three Pines. If you read the series, you know that several recent books have been based around an indigenous legend about two wolves.

As the legend goes, a grandfather is speaking to his grandson one day, and he says, "Grandson, I have two wolves fighting inside of me; one is gray, the other black. The gray one wants me to be compassionate, courageous, and kind. The black one wants me to be vindictive, fearful, and cruel." The grandson is upset by this image; he goes away to think about it. And then a few days later, he comes back and asks, "Grandpa, which wolf will win?" His grandfather replies, "The one I feed."

Friends, that is, in essence, repentance. Choosing to feed the good wolf – choosing what serves life and love – again, and again, and again. Choosing in our small, daily actions, to do what is loving, what is kind, what is merciful and just. And then waking up tomorrow and doing it all over again.

In Jesus Christ, God comes near to us. God gives us all the grace we could ever need to live a life of hope, peace, love, and joy. Now our job is to turn and choose the good. Again, and again, and again.

Repent. For the kingdom of heaven has come near. Amen.