

Does This Sound Like Advent to You?

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Text: Matthew 3:1-12

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 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.'" 4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

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? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 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. 10 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. 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Prayer

Sermon

This week I started really getting in to the season. I listened to a Nat King Cole Christmas album – actually two Nat King Cole Christmas albums; I was the happy recipient of fudge on two occasions; I started wearing more green than normal if that's possible. I did some Christmas shopping, I planned a holiday trip to see family. I sat last night watching the first snow. And everyday, I opened my Bible to the lectionary text in my preparation to preach today, the second Sunday in Advent. There, ready to shake things up, was John the Baptist. John the Baptist, in the wilderness, with the locusts, and the hairshirt. Does this sound like an Advent reading to you, I ask? Repent! Repent! You brood of vipers!

Sitting with the reading, I thought, it's been a rough Autumn, and we're finally into Advent, the fun stuff. We're thinking joyful, peaceful, hopeful thoughts. We're lighting candles, we're bringing presents for Manger Sunday. We're greening things. We're thinking about welcoming baby Jesus into our hearts once more. We're coming to adore Him. We're thinking about the future and maybe, just maybe, some of us aren't thinking every second about the Twin Towers. I thought, I do not want to preach on repentance right now. I do not want to drag us back down. I do not want to wear the hairshirt.

In Advent, we have hope for ourselves, and we have hope for the world. We think of the birth of the Messiah and what that means. More than hoping, in Advent we expect the world to become a better place.¹

But that's it, I thought, as I sat there still annoyed with John the Baptist. That's his point exactly! We expect the world to become a better place **THAN WHAT?**

¹ Paraphrasing Nancy Palmer Jones from a service this week at Harvard Divinity School.

It's in the shock of recognition of what is that we can envision what we hope will come. If we hope that the world will be a better place, then we recognize the world isn't now perfect. If we hope that we can be part of making the world better, then perhaps we also recognize our own part in the way the world is now.

Have you heard the proverb that we cannot appreciate that which is good without recognizing that which is not good? Let me offer a corollary: we can't hope for the future without realizing that there's room for improvement in the present. I can't envision a transformed world – a reign of heaven – if I think the world we've got is pretty much ok. Theologically speaking, we can't be open to receiving God's limitless forgiveness, compassion and mercy, unless we understand that there is something for which we need forgiveness, something for which we need to repent. I can't welcome the baby Jesus, the bringer of healing and forgiveness, the worker of miracles and teacher of truths, into the world and into my life without realizing that something fundamental is missing for me if he's not there.

In his call for repentance and preparation, John the Baptist is working to jolt us into this realization that all is not right with the world. I think we don't give enough credence to this prophetic vision. I'm shocked by this crazy guy, wearing a hair shirt and wondering around the wilderness shouting – he makes me nervous. A fellow student at the Divinity School said to me, “John's one of those wacky street corner preachers, and he's someone I think I'd avoid if I had the chance.” As a general rule, I avoid anybody who's shouting about God and repentance. Maybe you feel the same way? But, I propose to you that we'd have to avoid a lot of the Bible to skirt this message. John is not alone in his call for repentance in the midst of an invitation to prepare the way of the Lord, in the midst of an invitation to envision a transformed world. In fact, look at Isaiah. In Isaiah 11, the text used in our call to worship, we hear about the one who shall come with a spirit of wisdom and understanding, we hear about wolves lying down with lambs, we hear that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. Turn back one chapter. Chapter 10 of Isaiah begins, “Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees...turn aside the needy from justice... rob the poor... What will you do on the day of punishment?” Just a chapter after John the Baptist is out screaming, Jesus says the exact same thing, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17).

But here's the thing. They aren't just preaching repentance. They're looking forward toward a brighter future, too. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.* The kingdom of heaven, with the Prince of Peace, has come near. Repentance and hope are linked. Remember the words of Charles Wesley's Advent hymn – “Come O long expected Jesus, born to set your people free, from our sins and fears release us, let us find our rest in thee.”

In Isaiah and in the preaching of John the Baptist, we have both a prophecy of the One who is to come, who will change everything, and a call to change ourselves in preparation for that coming. They both look forward in optimism to a wonderful future, and their optimism is inextricably paired with the need for repentance. Advent is a time of expectation and preparation, so it is an alright time to be preaching repentance. Just as the more traditionally repentant Lent looks forward to Easter, so our repentance can be part of our preparation as we look forward in hope to Christmas.

Repentance, we all know, isn't just looking at the world and critiquing what's wrong with it. It isn't just looking at our families and figuring out what's wrong with them. It isn't just looking at our friendships and partnerships and figuring out what's wrong with them. Repentance takes it two steps further. Repentance recognizes what's wrong, recognizes our own part in what's wrong, and determines to make it right. Webster's says that to repent is “to turn

from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life." John the Baptist says, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." He's calling us to prepare the way, to not only make space inside ourselves for Jesus to enter in, but to participate in Jesus' activity of making the world a better place, to participate in the in-breaking of the reign of God.

"Bear fruit worthy of repentance," John says to the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets... You will know them by their fruits." (Mt. 7:16-20). What is our fruit? Is it worthy of repentance? The fruit of our Advent preparation, the fruit of our work making the way for and in the footsteps of Christ, this fruit will become the glorious fruit of peace with justice, of unbounded joy, of limitless love. This would be fruit worthy of our repentance.

Massachusetts Conference Minister Rev. Nancy Taylor closed her Christmas Letter in the United Church News by wishing us a "Profound Advent and a Merry Christmas." Advent is indeed a profound season – a time of reflection and repentance, a time of change and of hope. May it be so for each one of us.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!

Amen.