

**Repentance - A Sermon for 2 Advent, 2007**  
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**Isaiah 11:1-10, Mt. 3:1-12**

The message of John the Baptist is pretty hair-raising! His hearers, then and now (that means us), are accused in no uncertain terms. To rephrase John, borrowing slightly from a commentary: "You're a bunch of snakes, slithering down here for a water baptism, thinking because you already have a religious identity - children of Abraham, good Episcopalians, whatever, you're in tight with God; you're ready to receive Christ, back then, or now, in celebration of Christmas."

John throws cold water all over that - cold Jordan River water! He offers baptism for repentance, for purification, really, and such a water baptism was indeed a part of Jewish practice.

Messages like John's are part of why some of us don't like the season of Advent. While the rest of the world is already enjoying the merriment of the generic "holiday season", John's words present us with unwanted confrontation on the state of our souls and our lives. They're so different from the soothing reassurance we might hope for - something along the lines of "I'm OK; you're OK; God's nice; we should be nice to one another". This is Good News Lite, as mocked by a Methodist pastor describing the kind of preaching he grew up with.

But that kind of comforting message avoids the news that is at the heart of Advent. And that is a call to repentance, literally a call to turn, to go in a new direction. John's hard message is intended to bring us to our knees, to humble us, and, naturally, we resist it. It feels like we must grovel, especially in these brutal metaphors: the ax at the foot of the tree, the winnowing fork, the unquenchable fire. This is not how we are drawn to approach God! How can John's message possibly be good news, or Gospel, for us?

Well, for one thing, this tirade of John's is a call to repentance more than it's a conviction of sin. John is really offering a remedy for sin, although, I admit, in a most curmudgeonly way! He is not saying we are doomed because of our sins, either personal or corporate; he's saying we need to look hard at who we are and how we operate. We need to look at the kind of fruits our lives produce. Are they worthy?

If John were here in Washington today, he'd be ranting for sure, and, if he were, I'm sure he'd get arrested. He'd be ranting about war, about poverty, about torture, about misuse of power, about economic injustice and abuse of the environment - these corporate sins for which none of us is personally responsible. And John would most likely be calling for repentance in the form of

new leadership, a new direction, an acknowledgement that we are falling way short of who we could be as a democratic, first-world society and so-called superpower.

John might also be pointing his finger at some areas where individual repentance might be in order – habits and choices we make about time and money and relationships, addictions we deny, blindness to needs of others, whether close to us or strangers.

We might resist such confrontation – none of us wants to feel herself in the wrong. But the punishments John threatens are not for our sins; they are for non-repentance. That is the step we are urged to take – repentance – and, if we are willing, repentance will free us. In Hebrew, the roots of the word for freedom are the same as for the word for salvation – repentance can have saving power.

Repentance is about acknowledging our short-comings. It is first confession, and then the turning, the amendment of life which can follow. Repentance is a gift, not a burden.

In the powerful movie, *Dead Man Walking*, Mattie, the convicted murderer, is led, gradually and lovingly, by Sister Prejean, from denial to facing the reality of his crime and the confession of what he'd done. Even though his punishment was death, at the last, he knew himself loved and forgiven. Without repentance and confession, his life would have indeed ended in condemnation and utter estrangement from God. There was salvation in what happened.

The confessions that made up the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa at the end of apartheid attest surprisingly to the freeing power of repentance, of which confession is the necessary first step. Repentance is all about facing reality in order to be free to change and to live in a new way.

I came across a good example of a call to repentance in Carolyn Hax's column in the Style section on Friday. She writes a kind of hip Ann Landers type advice column for 20- and 30-somethings, and she was responding to a young woman who was concerned that her significant other was feeling anxious and helpless because he was so busy he rarely got to spend time with his dying mother, who lived hours away. Hax first states clearly that getting there, being there at such times for a loved one is essential, and there are only a very few excuses that count – like being in prison, or being too sick or too poor – none of which was the case here. Hax confronts the reality of the situation.

She goes on to counsel the young woman to do the same – to put forth every option for being with the mother, and then, if none really is possible, to help this young man make peace with this, help him see that he did everything

he could. Hax ends her response this way: “[This] matters, because helplessness takes two forms: One is when you can’t do anything, which is deeply upsetting. The other is when you don’t. That haunts people, sometimes for the rest of their lives.”

If we were to focus on just one aspect of how we might be called to repent, perhaps it is this: Where are we genuinely helpless to change, and how do we mourn these limitations, and, more importantly, where are we not helpless but still fail to do anything different? Just getting clear about that difference, for ourselves, and even as a nation, seems a real process of repentance.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that John’s news may not sound like good news, may not sound like gospel. But, I tell you, John’s message is gospel, and we need to hear it! Repentance is good news because it is the first step towards transformation, in ourselves and in our world. Repentance and forgiveness are the gospel’s remedy for sin – not condemnation, not guilt, not the requirement to achieve perfection. Repentance and forgiveness offer an amazing freedom to change and can open us up to all sorts of possibilities for ourselves and our beleaguered country. But willingness to repent and openness to forgiveness can be very hard to come by on our own. They feel much more like grace to me – gifts of God, from beyond ourselves or from deep within – and this is very good news indeed!

But perhaps the best news of all is Isaiah’s vision of what transformation can bring. We heard it in the first reading. This is the prophet’s dream of a world at peace, of the whole creation living in beautiful, splendid harmony. This was Isaiah’s view of the Kingdom of Heaven. Is this pie in the sky, an ideal ever out of reach? Perhaps so. Perhaps we’ll always study war and always be at war on this planet and even with this planet. But John, and later Jesus, promised that this Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, has come near you. John preached repentance as the first step towards embracing that Kingdom, to moving closer to its realization on earth. Are we helpless to do anything about claiming this Kingdom, or not? Amen.