

“Repenting Our Way to a Merry Christmas”

Matthew 3:1-12 (NRSV)

In the early 1970s a Russian prophet named **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** suddenly appeared on the world’s stage, recently released from the terrifying wilderness of the Soviet political prison camps, the infamous Gulag Archipelago. And he came with a **message of repentance**. Repentance among his own people in the communist east for allowing tyranny to exist and lying about it and, later, in his 1978 Harvard commencement speech, he also asked for repentance among the people of the west for allowing the kind of materialism and moral degradation which was -- and is still -- so common among us. **Some** on both sides of the east-west divide **welcomed his stern message, but many ridiculed him or ignored him**; and, after noting his winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature and his tragic, subsequent exile to the west, most people soon forgot all about him.

I realize repentance isn’t a frequently welcome message. It’s difficult message. It shakes us up. I’m sure there might be someone out there today who may say -- or at least will think -- “Give us a break. It’ll be Christmas soon. Surely, we don’t need another whine about our sin!” But, whether we like it or not, repentance is **an important part of the message of Advent**. For the only way we can prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ into our world and into our lives is to acknowledge the sin which is in us and the sin which is in the world. After all, that’s why Jesus came -- to save us from our sin. That’s the meaning of his name (Matt. 1:21).

The Bible tells us **John the Baptist** appeared on the scene “in the wilderness of Judea” just before the coming of Christ, and **his message was a message about repentance** (3:3:1,2). Okay, I admit it, John the Baptist was a bit of a wierdo (3:4) and a really stern kind of guy (3:10). Who’d want to pay attention to him, much less be baptized by him? Yet, clearly, many did. We’re told all kinds of people -- all the way from the city of Jerusalem to the countryside of Judea, and “all the region along the river Jordan” were “going out to him” (3:5). John seemed to have a message that spoke to them. It grabbed a strong hold of them. They wanted to turn their lives around. And they were glad to be “baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (3:6). There was a strange, inexplicable hunger among the people for repentance. Perhaps it may surprise you that there was such a hunger for repentance.

Do you and I have any appetite for repentance today? To see where this question might take us, let’s take a little closer look at John’s message.

1. John’s message called people to repentance (3:1-2).

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness in Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (3:1-2). I like the way **Frederick Buechner**, a New England novelist who is also a Presbyterian minister, portrays John the Baptist; for his dress and demeanour mirror his message:

John the Baptist didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage sale people wouldn't have handled. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time. The kingdom was coming all right, he said, but if you thought it was going to be a pink tea, you'd better think again. If you didn't shape up, God would give you the axe like an elm with the blight, or toss you into the incinerator like what's left over after you've lambasted the good out of it. He said being a Jew wouldn't get you any more points than being a [Gentile], and one of his favourite ways of addressing his congregation was as a snake pit. Your only hope, he said, was to clean up your life as if your life depended upon it, which it did, and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had. Some people thought he was Elijah come back from the grave, and some thought he was the Messiah, but John would have none of either. “I'm the one yelling himself blue in the face in the wilderness,” he said, quoting Isaiah. “I'm the one trying to knock some sense into your heads.”

(Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who, 1979, p. 69-70)

Have you ever noticed that though only Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with the story of the birth of Jesus, **all four Gospels introduce Jesus' ministry with an account of John the Baptist?** Luke emphasizes John's importance by devoting most of his first chapter to his birth, and to the relationship of John's and Jesus' families. Of course, it's clear that John paid tribute to Jesus right from the outset; but, later, even Jesus himself will say of John, “Truly, I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” (11:11). Jesus knew John's ministry of repentance was crucial.

That's why **every Advent season includes some mention of John the Baptist.** There'd been **no prophet in Israel for 400 years.** People wanted to know what God wanted. **John the Baptist** fit that bill. He spoke with the voice of God. He denounced evil wherever he found it, all the way up to the highest authorities in the land (14:4). He summoned everyone to righteousness. And there was an authenticity and integrity about his person that attracted people. The Bible says, John appeared **“in those days”** (3:1a), that is, in those days when the

voice of God had almost become silent, in those days when people were waiting for something to happen to changes things for the better, in those days when, perhaps, the Messiah would finally come.

John began his ministry “**in the wilderness**” (3:1b) -- in the sandy, stony desert -- perhaps, in part, to escape the distractions of the city. The “terrible” and “howling” wilderness” (Deut. 1:19; 8:2; 32:10), as the Bible described it, was the birthplace of the nation, the forge where the people’s faith was refined, renewed. John proclaimed his message of repentance from the same place. This should be no surprise to us. How often is it not true that people have come to discover that it is during **the difficult -- or desert -- times** in their lives, rather than during the soft and easy and pleasurable times, that they have found their faith tested and deepened? It seems that God can interrupt our lives more readily when he has our full and undivided attention. And when we cry out to him for help.

John began by saying, “ ‘**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ ” (3:1c). Interestingly enough, these are exactly the same words with which Jesus began his ministry (4:17). **Repentance** means having a change of heart, turning around, facing into a new direction, and making a new commitment. Both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ called for people to repent because it is only when we face our **sin** squarely and renounce it that we can we be freed from it. The tendency today is to call sin by any other name possible, and to blame it on the imperfection of the world in which we live. But such an attitude denies the reality of our sin, and ultimately leaves us mired in it. “**Repentance** is a hearty sorrow for our past misdeeds, and making a sincere resolution and endeavour -- to the utmost of our power -- to conform all our actions to the law of God” (**John Locke**). People in **Alcoholics Anonymous** know exactly what this means. Major changes and amends will have to be made. **Mary Chambers** drew a carton of two couples seated in a living room, engaged in Bible study. One of the women is speaking. “Well,” she said, “I haven’t actually died to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once.” Repentance is more than that. It is to take our sin seriously and to want to get rid of it, to get away from it, to die to it (Leadership).

What do we need to repent from? I’m sure sin will be different for each of us. It may be things we’ve said or thought or done, or things we haven’t said or thought or done. It may be a bad attitude or a hurtful action. Usually, it’s something particular to our own nature and temperament. Often, we already feel guilty about it, even before we repent. Only God and you know your own, individual and social sin. But deal with it!

Here is **the prayer of a true Christian penitent**,

O God, you've driven me into a corner where I cannot escape.
 I come to you penitently -- for today I'm aware I've sinned.
 I have betrayed my highest ideals.
 I have been false to my inner convictions.
 I know I have broken your heart.
 Thank you for dealing with me in the privacy of your personal presence,
 for my sin has been against you alone.
 Cleanse me, Lord; change me.
 Renew me until I am spiritually contagious.
 (**Ruth Harms Calkin**, Lord, It Keeps Happening and Happening)

The Bible says John the Baptist baptized people as they confessed and repented from their sins (3:6). "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, "I'm sorry," than to the future and saying, "Wow!" (**Frederick Buechner**, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, 1973, 79).

So John justifies this call to repentance by announcing that "**the kingdom of heaven has come near**" (3:2). "People do not simply turn away from one way of life; they only do so when they turn to something deeper and more true" (**Thomas G. Long**, 1997, 27). John the Baptist is announcing that a great page in human history is in the process of being turned. The day is coming when the Messiah will appear on the earth. The day is coming "when the earth will be full of the knowledge of God -- the doing of justice, the elimination of all the devices and structures that inflict human hurt, human destruction, human anguish" (**Borsch & Napier**, 1980, 20). And the best way to prepare for that day is to get on board, to change perspective, to repent.

That's what the people in John the Baptist's day wanted to do.

2. John's message called people to "straighten things out" (3:3). Matthew makes it clear that John the Baptist was quoting from the prophet Isaiah (40:3), as he proclaimed his message of repentance. His quotation from the prophet offers us another aspect to understanding what repentance is: "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'" (3:3). Repentance is primarily about **restoring a relationship**; it's about straightening things out.

In his Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer (1963, 1964), **C.S. Lewis** tells us that "repentance, at its highest level, is an attempt to restore an infinitely valued and

vulnerable personal relationship” with God or with another person. In its original context, “preparing the way of the Lord” meant preparing God’s way or the Messiah’s way. The best way for God’s Messiah to travel to the new Jerusalem is along a smooth and even road. All the bumps in the road ahead need to be leveled off; all the potholes need to be filled in. Behind John the Baptist’s quote, the prophet, **Isaiah** put it this way: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill [shall] be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain” (40:4). It’s a major construction project, this welcoming of the heavenly king!

I can see that this **smoothing out of the bumps in the road** has its parallels in the healing of the divine-human relationship and the various human relationships which have gone awry. There’s no doubt it will take some **major reworking** of our lives to put ourselves in better relationships with one another. Preparing for the Lord’s entry is **a perpetual task**. Like dealing with pot-holes, repentance isn’t a one-time action; it must take place daily if the road to God and to each other is to be maintained. Neither the world nor our lives are totally fit for the presence of God. We face a Herculean task to make them fit -- an impossible task for us to accomplish ourselves, even if we could, except for the grace of God and by the power of Christ’s Holy Spirit. Our work of preparation will not be complete until the day that Jesus comes again, at which time he will complete it.

3. John’s message called people to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (3:8).

In Christian theology, there is always **a healthy tension between God’s grace and our works**. John doesn’t tell us that our works will save us, but he does say that **repentance will produce good works**. Matthew doesn’t specify what John’s “fruit worthy of repentance” might be, but Luke gives us some good examples,

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” (Lk. 3:10-14).

It’s a pretty good list that gives us some clues as to where we might start. **Share** with one another. **Don’t take more** than you need. **Be fair**. Earn your living with

integrity. **Be content** with what you have.

Strangely enough, we're also told that **“many Pharisees and Sadducees” came to John the Baptist for baptism**. I'm not sure why they would've showed up. Perhaps some of them were sincere. They may well have nurtured a number of reasons why they also wanted to be included in John's baptism of repentance. As you may know, the Pharisees were known for their faithful keeping of the law and resistance to the influence of pagan culture, but the New Testament considers their orthodoxy to be superficial and highly legalistic. The Sadducees were known for their more liberal lifestyle and their collaboration with the Romans. That was also a problem to many. As far as Matthew's Gospel was concerned, it appears that John the Baptist didn't think most of them were sincere. We're told that he specifically called them, and not just “the crowds,” as Luke posits (Lk. 3:7), a **“brood of vipers”** (3:7a). And it was to them that John the Baptist went on to say, as he might have said to anyone he considered superficially religious, **“Do not presume ...”** (3:9a). Do not presume that you've got your salvation straight. Do not presume that you've got it all together. Do not presume to manipulate or misuse the things of God.

At its core, **the sin of the Pharisees and Sadducees** (and people like them) is **presumption**. Certainly, they're among God's chosen people. They “have Abraham's as their ancestor” (3:9b). And they are among the religious elite. But none of these things are any guarantee of God's favour. Do not get the idea that this repentance is a works-righteousness thing, that you and I can get right with God all by ourselves, even if we are important enough, or even if we are repentant. It's all by God's grace. We need to know that we need to repent, and that God himself will give us grace to do it, and that only then can we experience his loving power at work in our lives. Only God's grace will save us.

John goes on to say, “Even now the axe 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” (3:10). The picture is that of **an axe that has been taken from the tool shed to the orchard**, so that the owner can cut down unproductive trees. Can you imagine the sadness with which the owner goes about this task, having once planted these trees in great hope? Can you imagine the alarm with which the trees regard the axe lying at their roots -- ready to go to work -- not only to lop off a few branches but, perhaps, to take the whole tree down? What appeal can they formulate to persuade the owner to spare them? Unfortunately, the time for action was yesterday and, now, it is today! But, thankfully, **Jesus Christ has come**. Thankfully, in him, God's purpose and grace has been made clear. In him, God's Holy Spirit has been given to us to help us in our repentance.

Certainly, it's clear that **Jesus also partakes in this baptism of repentance.**

After all, Jesus asks John the Baptist to baptize him as a sign of solidarity with his ministry (3:13-7). **But Jesus is different than John.** Notice how John the Baptist himself acknowledges this: "I baptize you with water for repentance," he said, "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. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather the wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:11-12).

So here's how **Frederick Buechner** summarizes the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus:

One day, who should show up but Jesus? John knew who he was in a second, "You're the one who should be baptizing me," he said (3:14), but Jesus insisted, and so they waded out into the Jordan together, and it was John who did the honors. John apparently had second thoughts about him later on, however, and it's no great wonder ... Where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host of a marvellous party, or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John crossed to the other side of the street if he saw any sinner heading his way, Jesus seems to have preferred their company to the World Temperance Union and the World Council of Churches all rolled into one. Where John baptized Jesus healed.

(Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures, 1979, 70-71)

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 3:3:3).

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
 Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
 December 5 – Advent II (St. Nicholas Eve)