

## THE ESSENCE OF ADVENT

We ended last week with the meaning of “repentance” left hanging. The notion of repentance itself is inescapably one of the major themes of the Bible. But I tried to tease you with the thought that maybe there was more to it than you think. Today I have to make good on that hint and promise. And if I do, then you have all promised to repent, right?

Getting straight to it: Repentance, in popular usage, means to feel sorrow or remorse for something you have done or failed to do. Sometimes on a deeper level that may include regret for one’s whole way of life. In the same vein, repentance may imply changing one’s mind concerning past actions. Or again, on a deeper level, it may include changing one’s mind about the goals or values one has been living for. So repentance is turning with sorrow from a past course of action; being penitent, contrite; becoming aware of guilt and wrong.

I’m saying that I expect these descriptions to be registering in your ears as familiar meanings of the word “repentance.” Some preachers, including myself, have tried to lift the word into greater clarity by pointing out that it means to turn in a new direction. That is a better definition than what is normally meant in everyday conversation, and most of you know that meaning also. I have passed on to some of you what I was myself delighted to learn: the word was also used in the Roman army as a drill instruction. Repent meant “about face.”

Now, none of these meanings are wrong, *per se*. In fact they are right as far as they go. But they do not go far enough. They are small and measly definitions in comparison to the magnitude and meaning of the concept of REPENTANCE in the biblical framework. Just as it is possible to “damn with faint praise” a person, so it is possible to “destroy with faint definition” a concept, or to miss the glory through lack of understanding. For instance, one Sunday during my Altadena days, it was reported that the minister was having an affair with the choir director. I don’t remember how true that was at the time. However true, it should have been truer. Mariana was the choir director. Most folk thought it was a clever turn of phrase and gave it no more thought. But there was a visiting couple present who did not understand, and for a while they thought they had walked in on this news just as it was going the rounds of the parish. I’m not sure they

ever quite recovered from that first bad impression. They had been in a church where similar news had been no joke. I'm saying that the definition of Mariana as choir director was quite accurate, but it did not go far enough. So despite the accuracy, the meaning was ruined. Calling repentance "sorrow or regret for past actions" is similarly an inadequate definition.

This is Advent, the time before the Event: a time of preparation for Christmas. How do we know that repentance is central to Advent – in fact, the very essence of Advent? Usually, when looking for meaning, it is best to go back to the core story from which it all came in the first place.

John the Baptist is the forerunner. He is not only the forerunner in the birth narratives, but in the real story John prepares the way for Jesus' ministry. A dramatic, mysterious, impressive figure, this old-time prophet called "John the Baptist." We do not know how many years John had been at work, but we do know that there was a large, grassroots movement already flourishing before Jesus made a move. It was the common people who responded, and the sign of entrance into the movement was baptism. Christendom still owes one of its two mightiest sacraments to John the Baptist.

John was indeed an authentic prophet. He spoke from outside the religious establishment. His message was a powerful appeal to reform, both individual lives and the decaying commitment of the religious groups of his time. He sought no private financial benefit or public privilege for himself. His strict adherence to the ethical precepts of Judaism brought him into conflict with the leaders of his time. Eventually he was killed because he stayed faithful to the message he had been given to proclaim. There is only one other mark of the true prophet: his message must be from God – not from himself or from some human interest group (no matter how noble).

John seemed to know, at the time of his preaching, that the time for Messiah to appear was NOW. How did he know?! It had been 1,300 years going on 2,000 since Messiah was expected (depending on whether you start with Abraham or Moses). The yearning and the hope were increasing (and so were discouragement and disbelief), but how did John "know" that he was living at the *very hour*? Not only that, but John seemed to know that it was his job – his personal mission and destiny – to prepare the way, to get things ready, to try to awaken as many people as he could to also get ready ... for the Messiah to appear.

According to Christendom, John was right. Only God could have revealed the timing to him and given him his task as forerunner and preparer of the way. So John ranks as one of the great, authentic prophets of all time. And he did his job exceedingly well, despite nearly impossible circumstances. Indeed, Jesus moved into His own ministry with a large following ready and waiting for Him. They had to swing from allegiance to John over to Jesus, but John's imprisonment and death made that swing nearly complete. Even before that, it appears that Jesus was taking over John's movement with John's encouragement and blessing. So even Jesus' key disciples came partly trained and ready because of being John's disciples – Peter and Andrew and James and John, for instance; perhaps others as well.

Now, what is the heart and core, the essence and purpose, the *focus* of John's life and preaching? Ah, you remember and feel it connect: REPENTANCE! John the Baptist seems to have said little and cared little about anything else. It is repentance all the way and every time. So if we want to know the essence of Advent – the central meaning of the coming of Christmas – and if we finally realize that the very best and purest source for finding that out is to go to the prophet that God called, set apart, and sent for that very purpose and to make that very point clear, then it all comes together.

John the Baptist is the forerunner: the one sent from God to prepare the way for Christ. That makes him the top expert on Advent. And John's entire mission and ministry is built on and around repentance. If you want into Christmas, repentance is how you get there. If you want a hint or even a straight, forthright declaration of what Christmas is for and what Christmas is going to be about, there's John the Baptist with that very assignment. And what John says is, "Repent."

Most of us know this, or part of it. We sense and suspect it, at least in part. We just have trouble liking it. We console ourselves with wisdom: All growth does signify change on some level. In our clearer moments, we know that God is always going to be calling us into new adventures, and that means all the new lessons that will come with them. In our honest moments, we also know that straight, old-fashioned repentance is not archaic, out of place, or irrelevant to our own lives, any more than it has ever been for anybody. There *are* things we need to change about our lives. We do still get tempted, and succumb. We still wrestle with greed, lust, anger, sloth, pride, and all the rest. In fact, it's not so much that we think repentance is

inappropriate because we are so perfect. It's that we are already trying so hard to fix up all the things we know are wrong, and we just don't see how we can do any more or any better or go any faster than we already are. Except on top of that, there are a few things about ourselves that we have just about concluded will *never* change. We can pretend for a little while, maybe, but they always come back to cause us trouble and misery.

So it's not that we don't want to repent on these levels, but we have been trying as hard as we know how already and we don't know how to do it any better. And then to have somebody on the outside of this inner turmoil start yelling at us to repent, as if we were not already trying – that is an annoyance beyond bearable. So our feelings about repentance range between dislike and hatred. Jesus' coming may be about us gone wrong and a call for us to turn right, but until we get real faith that Jesus can do a better job on us than we have been able to do on ourselves, it is all highly irritating, insulting, and infuriating. Besides, even if we aren't perfect, we are pretty remarkable the way we are. And "If you knew what I've been through!" And moreover, who said the way I am isn't good enough? (All things that we say all the time, in countless ways.)

Theoretically, repentance does not imply that we have done anything wrong. But we will not be able to see that clearly until next week. Nevertheless, repentance is the essence of Advent. Repentance is the core concept we need in order to understand the meaning of Christmas. There is no need for God to send the Son unless there is a great and urgent need for dramatic change. The cost, after all, is very high. God is not going to ask the Son to go through that for parlor games! The stakes are obviously high. And Christmas comes over and over again, just like the young preacher's sermon I was telling you about last week. Christmas comes every year, over and over again. Thus we bear witness, to ourselves and to each other, that we know that all the changes have not been made yet – they are not completed in us yet.

Still, despite all the logic and all the obvious necessity of it, we do not like the flavor. It seems negative. It reeks of guilt and punishment and feeling bad; of needing to do something we do not know how to do; of being judged and condemned, or at least found wanting. Even if there are those unavoidable elements somewhere in it, nevertheless there is something about Christmas that is just joyful, and it is supposed to be wonderful – filled with wonder.

So we come to it. The definitions are too small. There is a crucial missing element somewhere. Remember the phrase from the hymn – “glad tidings from the King of kings”? Where is *that* part of repentance? Funny thing, it’s in the passage about John the Baptist too. Remember? Right after all the harsh and insistent proclamations, it says: “*So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.*” What is *that*? It does not sound like good news to me. Why did it sound like good news to them? They must have been hearing about repentance with some flavor we are missing. And indeed they were!

Repentance is not just the feeling of remorse or regret. Repentance is the whole process of the necessary change. Repentance includes the joy of the new WAY. We keep associating it only with the tail-end feelings about the ways that do not work.

Repentance is much more the joy of having found a new and better Way. Today we keep focusing on the despair of finding our lives dead-ending or of landing in misery or pain for ourselves and others. Our ancient forebears were focusing on coming back into light after having spent so long in darkness. So *we* hear John the Baptist scolding us. *They* heard John the Baptist giving them new hope and pointing them back to LIFE and joy.

Even more important than that, from my perspective, is that the heart and core meaning of repentance is to RETURN. Specifically it means to RETURN TO GOD, after having turned away or lost the way. It is homecoming! It is coming back to the true and rightful home – the true place where we do truly belong. You bet your sweet life it’s good news!

The reason Christmas is so incredible is because we find ourselves being invited back home – after thinking there is no hope of ever getting there; after we stop maybe even believing that home exists; after being sure we have blown it so badly we will never be allowed to come back again.

Christmas is the real-life enactment of the story of the Prodigal Son. Christmas is God’s long-awaited answer to the introductory story way back in the beginning, when we got kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Christmas is God’s incredible new action, saying, “You have spent some time out of the Garden, and now you know what the score really is. Now my Son has been sent among you to tell you that you can come home again.”

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Repentance is returning – coming back home. “*Return – come back to me,*” saith the Lord. And we say, “But we don’t know how to get back home.” And John doesn’t know that one either. He just say, “Do the best you can. Show you want it. Make a genuine turn that shows you are not willing to go along with the way things are here. And then wait for the One who is mightier than I am.”

Then the mightier One comes and makes it clear: He is about returning home – returning to God. And He will lead us, show us, carry us, save us. Poor words, but He will get us there, one way or another, sooner or later – if we will have it.

There is a lot more. But for today, let it sink in, and sink deep. Rework all your brain waves for everything you have ever heard or known about repentance. Repentance means to RETURN. “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*” – head for home; it’s time for the promised party. Sound any different? To return home – to return to God. That’s what Christmas is about.