

“Preparation Through Repentance”

“So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

Today's Gospel message is about preparation. It is about the honest preparation for the coming of Christ into our hearts that only takes place through true repentance.

I was a pretty good kid in high school. Huh? I half expected you all to burst out laughing when I said that! No, I really was a pretty good kid, but I also could be fairly wild too. For me, having recently returned to Knoxville, it did not take me long to realize that one of the most vivid reminders of my wild past can be readily found on the side of Northshore Dr. just a couple of miles that way. It is a telephone pole with a cross, some flowers, and a big purple heart that says, “love never ends,” It is the place where a friend of mine, named Adam, died in a drunk driving accident the night after our graduation from Bearden High school. I drive by that telephone pole almost every day, and what makes the sting of that memory even harder to bear is the fact that at the time of Adam's death, I was still having a good time at the very graduation party that he and other friends had just left, completely unaware of the horror and tragedy that had just taken place.

Things went back to normal pretty quickly after Adam's death, and this disturbed me. People who were much closer to Adam than I ever was, went back to their same old routines and habits in what seemed like days, regardless of the risks, and without respect for the loss that we all had just incurred. Almost no one changed. Now, maybe it was just how they coped with their hurt, or maybe they really didn't care. Regardless, this really bothered me, and this experience coupled with several other things going on in my life at that time ultimately caused a profound change in me. At that point, I broke from many of my friends. I chose to turn my back on them, to go the other way, to do a 180 on the darker side of the path that I was walking, and to leave Tennessee altogether in order to attend Appalachian State in N.C. where I knew that I would be completely alone and away from all that I was leaving behind. It was that time, a time when I was alone, in the mountains, on hiatus from my former life, that I very unexpectedly began to hear God's

call for me to ordained ministry. I share this reflection with you all this morning because I think that the lesson contained therein is the same message that John the Baptist is delivering to us in this morning's Gospel. Intentional change in our lives prepares us for the coming of Christ into our hearts. Repentance.

My first thought after reading this morning's Gospel over this past week was, "how in the world is that good news?" I mean, here we are listening to John the Baptist give graphic descriptions of unquenchable hell fire, the chopping down of fruitless trees, the Savior coming with winnow in hand to purify His threshing floor, and I'm thinking, this is Advent and John the Baptist is supposed to be preparing us to receive Christ, not scare us away from Him! Good news, huh? You could of fooled me; and yet, the last line of this morning's Gospel which I quoted at the beginning of this sermon even makes a point of stressing this. "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."

So this was my struggle all this past week as I tried to prepare something to say to you all this morning. The very word, "Gospel," literally means good news, and there I was praying over today's Gospel and struggling to find anything positive or good in it. Then, interestingly, the story that I just shared with you all came to mind, and I began to see. I began to see the good news. You see, John the Baptist's message in this morning's Gospel is actually just like my story when we think about it, because his message is about change. He is talking about repentance.

Now, I know that this word "repentance," for many of us carries negative connotations, or at the very least is somewhat misunderstood. If your like me then this word starts conjuring up all kinds of visions and memories of over passionate, hell fire and brimstone, street corner preachers, or at the very least those fascinating people who like to wear sandwich boards filled with bible verses as they loudly scream about repentance and the saving of our souls. Um, and I guess if your not like me and you don't think of these things when you hear the word, "repentance," well then that just makes me look pretty weird right now doesn't it? What I am trying to say is that I think many of us might be confused at times about the idea of repentance, and we might easily associate this idea with guilt and maybe even with confession. When we run into the type of people who really get a kick out of talking about repentance, it seems as though the focus of their message is on our unworthiness, our incompleteness, and on the fact that we should feel bad for the life we are leading. Now, they may have a point there, but the truth is that repentance is the step in our healing process that comes after the guilt. It comes after confession. When we fall

into sin our first step is to realize it and admit that we have sinned. That is confession, and that is where the guilt comes in to play. Repentance, however, is action. After all, the word repentance literally means to turn around, to go the other way. Repentance has nothing to do with guilt and everything to do with change, and that is what John the Baptist is talking about in this morning's Gospel. Change. Repentance.

You see, the liturgical season of Advent which we are currently in is about preparation. It is about preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ into our world. And just like in the story I shared with you all this morning, just as repentance or change in my life prepared my heart for God's guidance and call, so too does John the Baptist's message in this morning's Gospel call us to the same, to prepare each of our hearts for Christ's coming through repentance, through change. At first, it may seem like John is telling the various individuals who come to him that they need to earn their salvation by doing works worthy of repentance, but this is not John's message. Rather, John is telling the crowds to change and be forgiven. In effect, he is telling them to adopt a practice of doing the exact opposite of what they normally do or how they normally live their lives. He is not telling them to earn their forgiveness, John is encouraging them to change the very core of who they are.

Really, that is the message that I wish us to hear this morning. It is a call to repentance, a call to our constant and conscious change, done with the intention of preparing for our Lord. However, I urge us all this morning to also realize that this is not simply a message and a call for us to hear during the Advent season, but rather it is a message intended to be held close to all our hearts as we together make this Christian journey. See, while John was speaking in his time to the particular people who surrounded him about preparing themselves for the first arrival of God on earth in Jesus Christ, and while we today, in this Advent season, hear John's words as a call to prepare ourselves in liturgical time for the celebration of the arrival of Christ in Christmas, there is still yet a deeper way to understand this call, this Scripture. John the Baptist's words in our Gospel this morning call us to prepare for Christ's coming into our lives constantly, on a day to day, and perhaps even on a moment to moment basis through intentional repentance, and change in our lives. For John understood, just as I had to learn, that it is only through repentance, change, through the endless battle to reject the many things of this life which constantly fill our hearts that we are then able to prepare the space necessary in our lives and in our hearts to hear God's quiet voice and feel God's gentle guidance. Prepare, Change, Repent.

So, I suppose that in the end, John really did preach the Gospel, he did preach the good news even before Jesus showed up to be baptized. Now, I realize, as I hope you do, that

John was able to see the harsh warning that he proclaimed as great news simply because he truly understood that when repentance and forgiveness exist as possibilities for us, then even the prospect of judgment can become good news.

“So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

Amen.