

Sunday, December 17, 2017 – Third Sunday of Advent
“Make Straight the Way of the Lord”

John 1: 6-8; 19-28

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Definition

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Our preparation continues this third week in Advent. How's it going? Two weeks ago we tried to pause and ponder the mystery of God's coming during the rush toward Christmas, to prepare beyond today looking forward to when Jesus comes again. Last week we reinforced it – our preparation involves having something good to announce, not just feeling sorry when we repent but trusting in Jesus to forgive.

Today the focus narrows and zooms in on what we started getting into last week: Repentance. Maybe it will surprise you to hear that I sometimes struggle to really know what repentance is, I mean what it looks like, what it feels like on the inside.

Now of course I can define it. Repentance in Greek, the original language of the New Testament is metanoia and its literal translation is "to change one's mind." It's not so hard to describe, I told you last week, it has two parts: sorrow – gut wrenching, deep down remorse and regret that longs for the ability – if it were possible – to turn back the clock and undo something you have done – but then it is even more than that. It's being sorry at being the kind of person who would say, think and do the kinds of things I have thought and said and done.

To have that “sorry” experience will require me to change my mind about myself, who I am, and where things like my value, worth, character and dignity as a human being comes from. To have such a “sorry” experience will require me to change my mind about God and believe that He has something new and different in mind for me to bring me to trust that God will forgive me and THAT defines who I am – what God says about me.

John the Baptist came, preaching in the desert saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." And the people came out in droves from all the surrounding countryside. Some were baptized by him in the Jordan River which is where we want to end up by the end of this message but take careful note that most of this text is a warning to those who would come only for show – in other words, without repentance.

Remember – you can't fool God! Jesus is coming and those who have changed their minds will be gathered up and brought into the eternal kingdom of heaven – but those whose

hearts are cold and hard, even if they come out and honor Him with their lips, saying and doing religious things, they will be cast out, burned up, and lost forever.

John leaves no doubt over who is in the most danger. The Pharisees and Sadducees were coming out to where he was baptizing. You know who they were, right? This is one of the scariest parts of the Bible for me. Mark Twain once said, "Some people worry about the parts of the Bible they can't understand, I more worried about the parts I do understand." Understand this – the Pharisees and Sadducees were the get-up-every-Sunday-get-dressed-up-go-to-church people of Jesus' day. These are the leaders and the ones, who if you looked at them, or even talked to them, you'd think they have life all figured out and under control.

Here's what's scary – as I read my Bible I find myself with a whole lot more in common with this crowd than I do with the people whom Jesus spent most of His time with – people whose lives were not so clean cut and orderly. What I wouldn't give for a little repentance – some true sorrow, gut wrenching, deep down remorse and regret that longs for the ability – if it were possible – to turn back the clock and undo it all – but more than that – sorrow, remorse and regret not just for what I've done, but for even being the kind of person who would do, and think, and say the kinds of things I have thought and said and done.

A shoplifter wrote a note to a department store that said, "I've just become a Christian and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here's \$100 that I owe you. P.S. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

Can you relate? Is your stomach churning? Or have you excused the fact that you've laughed at, made fun of, even hated the people around you? Have you excused the fact that God has given you schools and teachers and yet you sit in your classroom day after day and despise learning? Have you excused the fact that you live for the next high, the next latest and greatest newest thing? Have you excused the fact that you are the kind of person who can find excuse for anything? Yeah, me too.

Here's repentance – to hear the announcement of Jesus coming and recognize that you have looked for love in all the wrong places – you have imagined that your value, your worth, your character, your dignity as a human being is derived from your success or failure at the things this world deems significant. You have imagined that as long as you can keep your life

looking halfway decent on the outside, as long as you can avoid making mistakes that you've got it all under control.

Here's repentance – to hear the announcement of Jesus coming and understand that unless He changes your mind about who you are and where your value and worth and character and dignity as a human being come from you will not survive the coming of Jesus.

Here's repentance – to long for something different and come to realization that you are absolutely helpless to do anything about it. And then hear again for the first time – "After me will come One who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Now rush forward to the manger in Bethlehem. Christmas is coming! And from there to the cross. And from there to the empty tomb. And then back again to your life. Guess what? Jesus declared His love for you! He determined that you were so valuable to Him that He would come down from heaven Himself to give you something new and different.

This is what the Christian faith declares: the baby in the manger is God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus lived as one of us, tempted in every way, as we are, harassed and helpless, grieving over the pain the suffering that goes on seemingly without end in this world. But here's the twist – He didn't just show us the way, or to set an example for us to follow, so we could somehow fix our own problem – He came to do life perfectly and then be cut down Himself, like a tree that had produced no good fruit, to suffer and die on a cross and be cast into the fire for our sins.

Nowhere in heaven or on earth will you find a story like this one – where God suffers and dies to give new life to people.

Here's repentance – that you believe in Him and that by believing you are changed. Here is repentance that once again, today, you believe that by His life, death and resurrection you are remade, created anew by the very words you are hearing. You are now a new experiment of the Creator. It is as if you were only a few minutes old.

Here's repentance. To hear and believe again for the first time, you are forgiven and with that forgiveness take a new look at your life and change your mind about the way you've been acting and thinking and feeling. God is at work in you to do what is right according to His

standards, to walk humbly through this life with your head held high not in pride over your own accomplishments, but rather amazed at how proud God is of you.

Here's repentance, to know quietly in your heart through the faith God gave you, trusting the promises He makes in baptism, that you belong to Him and be willing and able to risk everything because you know His love cannot fail, to charge into the day, and the week, and the years with all confidence and boldness and then lay your head down on your pillow at night trusting that He waits in eager expectation of the joy you will bring Him tomorrow. In Jesus' name, Amen.