

Sermon for Advent II—Year C 2018
Are You Ready for Christmas?

As I was standing on line in Macy's a few days ago, the man ahead of me turned and asked the question we hear this time of year: "Are you ready for Christmas?" I wanted to respond, "Well, you should know that you just asked a Lutheran pastor a question that could take an entire sermon to answer!" But I decided to smile and tell him a short version of the truth, "No. I've only just begun." He smiled back and said, "Me, too." And I thought to myself, "I hope you keep on getting ready."

For many that question, "Are you ready for Christmas?" is answered with the anticipation of the joy of spending time with family and friends, the excitement of feasting and parties, gifts and time off from work.

For others that question is answered with sadness and grief. It is a reminder of how this year will be different, a reminder of sorrows and losses.

For most of us that question speaks of busyness, shopping, decorating, cooking, cleaning, perhaps travel and the general chaos of getting it all done.

Regardless of how you answer that question, whether you fit in one of these categories, or offer your own unique answer, the question, "Are you ready for Christmas?" speaks of a particular day of the year.

So, to help us think more deeply about our answer to that question, every year at this time, the Second Sunday of Advent, the church asks us to hear John the Baptist.

Whether it is from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke—
on the Second Sunday of Advent we hear the voice of one
crying out in the wilderness.
When he asks and answers the question,
“Are you ready for Christmas?”
the Baptist does not, however, speak of a particular day.
He speaks of a particular *way*—“the way of the Lord.”
He does not speak about getting things ready.
Instead he speaks about getting *ourselves* ready.
“While the world announces preparation for a holiday,
John [the Baptist] announces preparation for a *way*.” (G. Kevin Baker)

The Voice in the wilderness interrupts
the circumstances of our life.
His message disrupts the patterns and habits of our life
within our family, social circumstances,
business transactions, and even consumer activities.
John’s message is always a message of hope and promise.
The word of God comes in every time, place, and circumstance
offering a new way, a new life, a new world.
John points to that coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance,
echoing the prophet Isaiah,
*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth.*

This is not simply a description of the geography of the wilderness.
It is, rather, a description of our inner landscape.
With prophetic insight, these words describe our life.
Each of us could name the ups and downs,
the highs and lows, the mountains and valleys of our life.
We could recount the crooked paths on which we got lost
and the rough ways on which we stumbled and fell.

With prophetic fore-sight these words describe
the possibilities that our life and world can be different—
the low places can be filled and lifted up,
the high places can be made low,
what is crooked can be made straight,
what is rough can be made smooth.
These words describe both what is and what might be.
Repentance is the movement from what is to what might be.

Repentance is how we prepare the way of the Lord.
And what is “the way of the Lord”?
Human life is the way of the Lord.
God does not come in the abstract.
God comes incarnate as a human being.
God comes to us in, with, and through human life—
including yours and mine.
So, if *our life* is the way of the Lord,
then the Baptist calls us to prepare our life, to repent.
We repent, not because we are bad or defective,
but because we are loved and
we are in need of some reorienting.
God’s love and compassion for us are the basis
of every call for repentance.

Repentance is not focused on condemnation and judgment,
guilt and remorse, or even saying, “I’m sorry.”
Imagine if you asked someone to give you a ride to Hackensack,
and instead they started driving toward Secaucus.
Wouldn’t you say, “But I wanted to go to Hackensack,
instead you’re going the wrong direction toward Secaucus.”
The driver says, “Yes I am really sorry
and I feel just awful about it.”
That is not repentance!
And *that* is not the message of John the Baptist.

If, however, the driver turns the car around and begins driving north toward Hackensack—*that is repentance*. Repentance is about getting our life turned around and heading in a new direction, in the right direction. It means a change of mind and heart. The U-turn of repentance involves both a *turning away* from something and a turning toward something else.

Repentance begins with examining our lives and discovering the patterns and habits of seeing, thinking, speaking, acting, relating, and living as if God were not present and active. They are patterns that blind us to who God is, who our neighbor is, and who we really are. These patterns and habits distort reality, impoverish our relationships, and ultimately keep us from love and joy. They are things like anger, pride, fear, greed, the need for approval, perfectionism, being judgmental, gossip, the need to control or to be right, individualism, busyness, sorrow, self-hatred, and despair.

Insight to these patterns and habits *by itself* is not enough. We need then to *turn away* from these old and deadening ways of being in order that we might create new patterns and habits of seeing, thinking, acting, relating and living that *recognizes God's divine presence in all people and places*.

When we repent, we turn around and turn our gaze back to God, reclaiming the life that is and always has been our true life. We consciously and intentionally begin developing new ways of being that are modeled on God's own life. Things like love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice, peace, wisdom, patience, beauty, creativity; things that bring love and joy to us and to others.

In so doing we are conforming ourselves to the image and likeness of God in which we were created.

Repentance, in a sense, is the refining fire that reveals that we are, in fact, precious and valuable in God's sight.

When we repent, we are preparing the way of the Lord.

So, repentance in Advent *is not just about* getting to Christmas Day.

Repentance is a way of life, a way of being.

To be sure, the way to Christmas is

by way of hearing the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

But repentance does not end with Christmas.

It ends with the fulfillment of a promise:

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

What will you say the next time someone asks you,

“Are you ready for Christmas?”

You could send them a copy of this sermon

or you could just say,

“Well, with God's help, I've turned a corner and

I'm on my way!”