**Matthew 3:1-6** Advent 2

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*Matthew 3:1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” 3This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” 4John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Therapy or Theology?**

**Advent is a Time for… Repentance**

Long before we invented all the things that keep us busy in the month of December, someone told us how to get ready for Christmas. Before there were work parties, Christmas cookies, ornaments and family get-togethers, there was John the Baptist. He told us how to get ready for the Christ.

Problem is, he wasn’t a pretty sight, and in the weeks before Christmas we much prefer pretty things. John lived in the desert, ate what God gave, and probably didn’t carry a comb or razor in his camel-hair pullovers. His message wasn’t pretty either. Instead of the cuddly pre-Christmas sentiments we are used to, John had a very strong message. His fiery sermons could be summed up in one word: “Repent.” That is not very Christmassy. “Repent” is not the sort of thing you shout across the parking lot after the company Christmas party. It’s not the sort of thing you smile and say to the Wal-Mart teller: “Repent.” To the best of my knowledge I have never gotten a Christmas card with a giant “Repent” across the front of it. And to tell the truth, I wouldn’t know what to think if I did. Yet as the promised Savior of the world stood in the doorway, ready to step into human history, the message God sent into the world was—you guessed it—“Repent!”

Up at our pastor circuit meeting this past week, a retired pastor marveled at how the season of advent has been buried by Christmas. It is hard for Christians to focus on Advent! It wasn’t always that way, he said. There was a time when most people didn’t really think about doing their Christmas shopping and baking and letter writing until well after Thanksgiving. Now when do we start? Mid-October? Advent has been buried alive in all the Christmas stuff we do, and we are the worse for it.

Now, to be sure, the weeks before to Christmas are not only about sorrow over sin. Advent is meant to be joyful, yet it has a quiet and contemplative edge. The general attitude of Advent is a bit like an expectant mother in her eighth or ninth month. There is joy to be sure. But there is also a profound concern for important things, a look to the future, to doing things right. Even more than New Year’s, advent is a time for sincere resolutions. Advent is about a light shining into a world darkened by its own sin. That’s what these candles [point to advent wreath] are about.

Here again [still pointing at the wreath], we have buried the simple, elegant meaning of advent in our over the top desire for more. *Centuries* *after* the advent wreath tradition started, we belatedly attached significance to each candle, like hope, love, joy and peace. We couldn’t leave well enough alone. Not that those are bad things. But the original message was so clear. It was what the prophet Isaiah had prophesied when he saw the Messiah at a distance. It was what the Evangelist Matthew repeated when he saw the Messiah up close: *“The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned”* (Is 9; Mt4). That was what the original advent wreath had in mind. It was just about light and darkness, sin and salvation. That doesn’t deny hope, love, joy and peace. But those only have a place because Jesus the Light of the World came to defeat sin and its darkness.

John the Baptist knew it. He knew that he could not preach about hope, love, joy and peace until he had preached about something else: ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”***

Now here we have to be careful. As you heard in part of our Gospel reading, John directed some very harsh words to unbelievers in his audience, ***“You brood of vipers…ax at the root of the trees…cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** He *also* preached repentance to believers. It’s not a “coming to faith” repentance, but a “daily sorrow over sin” repentance. The first half of our reading was for believers, for you.

At this point in history, Jesus had not yet appeared. Many of John’s audience knew the Old Testament. They were waiting for the promised Messiah. They came out to John because they heard a preacher who preached the Bible, the faith they knew. Yet John said even to them, ***“Repent!” “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near… Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”*** His cry even to believers was, “Own the fact that you are sinners. Confess your sins daily to God. Trust in him who forgives you, and change the way you live. Stop being half-hearted. Why are you so concerned about the things you want and so unconcerned about the things God wants? Why do you gaze on things you shouldn’t, listen to things that tear down faith? Stop it! Or does God’s goodness mean so little to you? ***Repent!”***

**We Are Surrounded by Therapeutic Christianity**

How different John’s message is from the message heard more and more often in Christian houses of worship. More and more—and you can see this on television or listen to in on the internet—the message of the most popular Christian sermons is therapy rather than theology. Now therapy has its place, I’m not denying that. But our faith relationship with God is not therapy; it is theology. (What is theology? Biology is the study of life. Geology is the study of rocks. Theology is the study of what pertains to God.) Theology is first and foremost about God; therapy is human centered.

What am I talking about? Therapeutic religion is the flavor of Christianity you find in most of the largest churches in our nation. Therapeutic religion is primarily concerned about optimizing my life. It sounds like this: “Five ways to deal with anger.” “How to get out of the debt cycle.” “Practical pointers for godly people to advance in their jobs.” Therapeutic religion sounds so practical! And the preachers even sprinkle in Bible passages! But do you hear how self-centered it is? How *not* God-centered it is? Listen to those sermons with tens of thousands of views and you won’t hear about the *sin* of anger – which is what Jesus calls it. They will talk about methods to manage anger; therapy. The preacher will add some Bible passages, maybe an example from the life of David. But in the end it is person centered rather than God centered. Let me be clear: I am not calling these people unbelievers. But I am calling them confused. They proclaim a human centered Christianity. Of course that’s popular; we like nothing better that to talk about ourselves!

Now, to be sure, God’s word does have things to say about anger, debt and promotions. But when you bother to actually read your Bible you find out that those are not the focus of God’s communication or relationship with anyone in the Bible. When optimizing my life becomes the focus of my walk with God, we don’t have theology, we have therapy. We have become interested in God mostly so we can have more of what we want. Therapeutic religion fails to realize that the Bible is first about God, and secondarily about us. Healthy Christian faith is about sin and a Savior, about what God loves and what God hates and what God does, far more than about what is going to make my life look better on Facebook.

**God-Centered Christianity Daily Repents**

John the Baptist didn’t confuse therapy and theology. He shouted, ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*** He tells me that the problem isn’t that I could do better managing my anger, my grief, my whatever. The problem is that I am a sinner. And every failure to do what God wants is punishable here on earth and in eternity.

What I need to do with all of my sinful thoughts, deeds and actions is feel remorse over them, not to say, “I could have done better” like the mega-church preacher says. I need to realize that what erases my past sins is not my sincere attempts to do better in the future like the mega-church preacher implies, but that Jesus died and suffered and paid the penalty of my daily sins. And then we *want* to do what God loves out of thankfulness for God’s forgiveness, not just because we should be doing better. Repentance is a complete re-mapping of the hard drive, not cleaning up around the edges.

When you hate the evil of your past, when you treasure the present blessings, and when you live for God in the future, then you are starting to imagine what John the Baptist saw out in the desert. ***“People went out to [John] from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”***

The same baptism, where God claimed you, is a reminder of what should daily happen inside each believer. Martin Luther said in the Catechism: “[Baptism] means that our Old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise…to live in the presence of God in righteousness.” The renewal John’s listeners felt coming out of the Jordan River is the renewal you also feel after receiving that other Sacrament, Holy Communion. You have felt it—as you receive bread and wine together with the body and blood of Christ, you feel the relief of forgiveness, the affirmation of acceptance, the desire to live a holy life.

That’s repentance! That’s what advent is about.

But what if I am comfortable where I am and don’t want to repent?

Several years ago, in a country we would call a “Third World” country, outside the capital city, down 40 miles of dirt road, was a national park. On most of that 40 miles of dirt road there had not been so much as a road grader for more than a decade. It was a terrible road. In the rainy season even four wheel drive vehicles got stuck—on the road! One day the president of that nation decided that he wanted to visit that national park. We lowly ordinary people had had to slog through the mess day to day, year to year and it didn’t matter to anyone. But once the president decided that *he* was going to visit for a single day!, that road got whipped into shape. Not only were there road graders, there were front loaders and dump trucks all up and down that road. It was transformed from a rutted mud pit to the finest shape it had ever been in. It brought to mind John the Baptist’s words, ***“Prepare the way… make straight paths…”***

Now if that happened in America, what do you think would happen? All those thousands trudging through the mud for years and when the president comes for a single day it was made beautiful just for him. If that happened here, it would be all over the news. The Twitterverse would be on fire. Journalists would decry the president’s behavior. Congressmen would tell us that such a president is not worthy of the office.

Now I’d not be telling the truth if I said everyone felt this way, but do you know a great many of the people of that “third world” nation reacted? I can tell you because I heard it in the grass thatched houses. Most of them said, “That’s the way it should be! That’s what you do for a president!”

We have a natural resentment against repentance, against straightening out the roads, even if God himself tells us to! “It’s my life! I’ll live it the way I want!” When God’s Word tells us to repent, to make straight paths, to root out sin, to put God and his kingdom first, he is telling us how to prepare the way for Christmas! Advent is about theology, not therapy. Advent is first and foremost about God, not us. Get ready for it like Christmas is God stepping right into the middle of your life, because that’s what it is.

So go home and light your advent wreath this evening. Shut off the lights, have a devotion, and appreciate the growing light as through the weeks one, then two, then three and four candles are lit. The True Light is coming! Let us make straight the paths—because that is what you do when your Savior steps in to your life. Amen.