

## Repentance!

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 5, 1993, the second Sunday of Advent. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I want to talk to you about repentance today. Repentance! God calls us to repent. Repentance is at the very beginning of the Good News according to Mark. It's certainly not the final word but it *is* the beginning word. So I want to talk about repentance. Actually, I don't just want to talk about repentance. I want to repent. <sup>God wants</sup> ~~I want~~ all of us to repent. There's something within us, ~~I think it's~~ the Spirit of God, that wants us to repent, that longs for us to repent.

Repentance! John the Baptist preached repentance. He appears in the Judean wilderness as an unschooled, uncouth, back woods fundamentalist preacher. John was a prophet, the last of the Old Testament prophets. He wasn't an evangelist. Evangelists - I'm not talking about T.V. evangelists- but real evangelists reach out to all kinds of people outside the church. Jesus was an evangelist, going out to find the lost sheep, touching lepers, eating and drinking with sinners. Mother Theresa is really an evangelist as she brings the love of Christ to India's untouchables. But John wasn't an evangelist. He was a prophet. Prophets preach mostly to those raised in the church. Prophets call us to live up to the responsibilities of being a member of the church. Prophets threaten. Prophets warn of famine, war, disease, earthquakes and other disasters that come when God's people break God's laws. Prophets call us to repent. John was a prophet.

John, however, addressed God's people as if they were pagans. "Get baptized",

he preached. In those days before Christ, baptism was only for gentiles who converted to Judaism. Old Testament Jews weren't baptized. But John called Jews to be baptized. "You're no different than the Gentiles. Repent! Confess your sins! Get baptized!"

Now you wouldn't think that kind of preaching would attract church people, but it did. "People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him." John was preparing them for the coming of Jesus. The Church has read the story of John the Baptist for over a thousand years on the second Sunday of Advent. Advent means coming. We're preparing for the coming of Jesus. Advent reminds us that the best way to prepare is through repentance

But how do we repent? How? You've tried to repent! I know you've tried. I've tried to repent of all kinds of sins. Hundreds, thousands of times! Repentance isn't easy. In a few moments I'll ask John and Sherry Hunter to repent. "Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's righteousness and love?" "Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?" "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior?" "Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?"

A minister friend asked those questions to a young boy before his baptism. After asking the questions he directed the boy, "Say 'I will', if you will." The boy responded, "I will, if you will." How true to life that response is. His response reminds me of how I need to renounce evil and sin and turn to Christ if I ask others to. But how difficult it is to repent. Sometimes, after failing many times, I

wonder if repentance is even possible. *I want to give up.*

When I'm feeling that way I remind myself that repentance is a process rather than a once-and-for-all decision. Repentance is a life long process. Thirty years ago, when I was in college, I heard my English professor read part of a poem by T.S. Eliot. I thought, "Wow! That poem describes me!" I didn't know the name of the poem. I went to the library, found a copy of Eliot's poetry and read and read until I finally came upon what I was looking for. It was in his "Poem 'From the Rock'". He wrote, *as a description of the church - of Christians -*

Bestial as always before, carnal, self-seeking as always before,  
selfish and purblind as ever before,  
Yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming  
their march on the way that was lit by the light;  
Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet  
following no other way....

O Light, Invisible, we praise thee!

Eliot was a Christian. He was describing his own struggles and the struggle of his brothers and sisters in Christ to repent and turn to Christ. He describes repentance as something we do throughout our lives.

Eliot helps me to remember that repentance is not a once-and-for-all decision. It's the beginning of a life-long process - a life long journey into the light - a journey on which we often halt, we loiter, we stray, we delay, yet, because the Spirit of Christ is in us and won't let us go, we're always resuming our march, following no other way than the way that is lit by the light of Christ.

Repentance is like learning to walk. When our boys were learning to walk they often stumbled and fell. Sometimes they hurt themselves. We didn't scold them.

We didn't condemn them. We encouraged them. "You can do it," we cheered. "Keep trying!" We did this because we were sure that their stumbles and falls were all part of the process of learning to walk. We can't learn to walk without stumbling and falling and hurting ourselves over and over. We learn to repent in much the same way that we learn to walk. Not by others scolding us, but by being encouraged, supported, and assured by those who've been through it themselves. If there's punishing, blaming, and mistrusting when God's people stumble and fall, none of us would have the courage to keep on trying.

*John Hunter, This morning you officially begin your walk in the light of Christ*  
~~And if we begin to walk in the light of Christ we're sure to stumble, fall, and fail.~~  
*As you - your Christian walk you need to know that you're going -*  
God doesn't scold <sup>us</sup> you. God doesn't condemn <sup>us</sup> you. God, in Christ, comforts <sup>us</sup> you. God speaks tenderly to <sup>us</sup> you. God gently gathers <sup>us</sup> you in his arms when <sup>we</sup> you fall. God carries <sup>you</sup> you in his bosom when <sup>we</sup> you get tired of trying. The ordinary way God does this is through the preaching of the Word, the sacraments and the fellowship of the people of God.

That should tell us that repentance isn't something we do all by ourselves in the isolation of our own lonely individualism. Repentance isn't a matter of just saying "no" to sin. It's not a matter of our own individual selves struggling heroically all by ourselves with our sins and temptations. We need other repentant people to help us repent. When death robs us of a love one - when our life is shattered by a divorce - when we fail morally over and over again - we're able to reaffirm and resume our journey because God accepts us through our brothers and sisters in Christ. God gathers us in his arms through them. He speaks tenderly to us through

them. That can't happen as long as we're merely a name on the church register. We must really be a member of the church - that is, be an active participant in a group of sinful, struggling, people who've been claimed by Christ through baptism and confession.

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, let us repent - let us all confess our sins and turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. Turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love! Let us, together, be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying his Word and showing his love.

Let us pray: God of our salvation, you straighten the winding ways of our hearts and smooth the paths made rough by sin. Keep our conduct blameless, keep our hearts watchful in holiness, and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near; your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.