

Sermon Advent 2A December 8 2019

Matthew 3:1-12

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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To all God's beloved here, who are called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from our Triune God. *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* Let's pray:

Last Sunday evening, we had a lovely dinner and a Lessons and Carols service to celebrate the beginning of Advent. For the most part, it was peaceful with the exception of a kerfuffle just inside the kitchen door. Now, as I studied the gospel text for this sermon, a broad grin began to stretch across my face as I read about John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness wearing camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist proclaiming: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

These weren't exactly the words spoken by my assailant at the Advent tea last Sunday, but as I read the gospel, I immediately thought to myself, "Isn't that ironic." Our charming little gathering was interrupted by the screaming of a crazed outburst.

It's ironic because we always have a John the Baptist reading the 2nd Sunday of Advent – which means that any comfy, Christmassy feeling you might be having around this time in the Advent season, is always going to be interrupted by John the Baptist yelling, "Repent!" at you, as little pieces of unchewed grasshoppers come flying out of his unshaven mouth. Happy Advent everyone!

I must confess, I'm not a big fan of the word, "repent". Maybe you aren't either. What rubs me up the wrong way is the way some people spit it out angrily at you, like when I hear a street preacher shouting, "Repent!" What I really hear is, "stop being bad and start being good or else God's going to be mad at you and send you to

burn in hell. Repent or burn!” That feels more like a threat than anything else. And that just doesn’t work on me. Who wants their spiritual arm twisted until they cry, “I give up!” To me, that’s religious bullying.

And I can’t imagine that it was religious bullying which brought people from Jerusalem and all Judea to be baptised by John. There’s no question that fear and threats can create change in behaviour. But fear and threats don’t really change your thinking. Threats don’t change your heart.

And that’s what God is up to. Changing our hearts and minds. After all, the Greek word for repentance is *metanoia* which means “changing your mind” – changing how you think about something. We want to make repentance about changing our lifestyles and sometimes that’s necessary. Sure, changing things in our lives can of course be a holy thing, but repentance isn’t just about cleaning up your act. I think God is after much more than that. What *metanoia* means is to snap out of it, to think new thoughts. That’s a much more challenging proposition.

Honestly, I feel like I’m a prisoner of about half a dozen neurological grooves that just funnel the same, repetitive thoughts through my brain over and over, year after year. It’s as though I’m held captive by a couple of deeply worn grooves that funnel all the same thoughts about what’s good and bad about my life and about the world and about other people too.

And hey, since we’re in the holiday season, let’s just admit that it’s especially hard to think new thoughts when it comes to our families. I know it’s hard to imagine, but if our rellies have actually changed as people – if they have grown and are not the same as who they were when we were raised – can we see that? Do we even allow for that possibility?

The same goes for our kids as they get older. I wonder if the quality of the relationship we're able to have with our children directly correlates to how quickly we can keep up with the ways they change; to being able to think new thoughts about who they are. It's so easy to pigeon-hole our kids, or our friends or our siblings or our boss – really anyone in our lives and never notice any change. Even when the things we think about other people might be true. Maybe your boss really is _____. That's fine. But that's not the only thing he or she is. Maybe your child is a little _____. That's okay too. But that's not the only thing they are either.

And for some of us, the set neural grooves that produce the same thoughts over and over about ourselves are the most entrenched and the most malicious. Think about it. What thoughts do you think about yourself to yourself the most often? And would anyone who loves you ever think those same things? Are those the thoughts God, who loves you, would have about you?

As someone who believes that we are all simultaneously sinner & saint, that there is bad in the best people and good in the worst people, I'm not suggesting that thinking only positive things about how wonderful we are would be accurate or even healthy. I am suggesting that some of us tend to only allow the negative aspects of who we are to enter into the equation of how we view ourselves.

And I get it – some of these thoughts about ourselves may have come from our childhood when messages about who we are stuck to us like name tags - "Hello, I'm impatient" or "hello, I'm worthless" or "hello, I'm a nuisance."

But what if repentance means being freed from thinking these same thoughts over and over? What if the call to repent, the call to change our thinking isn't a threat, or even a command, but an invitation? What if God is saying to us, "Here, have some corrective lenses."

Maybe repentance means that God is offering us some putty for those neural grooves. I'd grab two handfuls because at times I find my mind exhausting. Because when all I am left with are the same thoughts over and over, nothing ever gets to be new. And we are told that Jesus Christ came to make all things new. Even us. Even our minds.

So how does this fit in with the last verse of our reading where John the Baptist says that Jesus has a winnowing fork in his hand and he will separate the chaff from the wheat and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire? This is what the fire and brimstone street preachers use to threaten people. Repent or burn! They literally spit it out at you.

Instead, I say let's accept the invitation to repent AND burn.

Because I think there is both wheat and chaff within us all; both saint and sinner. I also think we're not the best judges of which is which. And God is offering us *metanoia* – to think new thoughts - to separate the good from the bad and burn away that which doesn't serve us.

You see, now that we are saved, we are free and we are permitted to make choices. But before Jesus claimed us in baptism we were under the power of the devil and bound to sin. We couldn't choose God. Now, we live all the days of our lives as both saints and sinners, daily being made holy; the chaff being separated from the wheat by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit until our faith is perfected.

St Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (not by the renewing of your lifestyle – not by the renewing of your workout – not by the renewing of your credit history – but) be transformed by the renewing of your minds [12:2].

That is why my prayer for today, is that we turn AND burn. I pray that all of us here today be given new thoughts.

I pray to Jesus who makes all things new: "Help us let go of our old ideas." May God give us some divine putty to fill in those worn neural grooves that produce thoughts that don't serve us and that don't serve God and that don't serve our neighbours. May God give us the strength to reach for those corrective lenses he's wiping on his shirt and handing to us so we can see with new minds. Minds that see God's glory amidst the chaos. Minds that perceive God's hand at work in even the most annoying people in our lives. Minds that move more toward curiosity than judgement. May God burn away the old. And make us new.

Repent and burn, children of God. Repent and burn.

In God's blessed and holy name, Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.