

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

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¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

This is the season of Advent when the church thinks about the *coming* of Jesus and making *preparations* for the ministry of Jesus. So we are assigned texts from the Bible about preparing to do Jesus’ work. That’s the story we have this morning in the Gospel of Matthew. John the Baptist is out in the wilderness *preparing* for the coming of the son of God.

To do such a beneficial thing for such virtuous people, John the Baptist’s words are recorded for us. “Repent!” “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Is this really how God wants us to prepare for the ministry of Jesus Christ?

It is not a very affirming thing to say. When John the Baptist calls people “a brood of vipers” there doesn’t seem to be a lot of room for further conversation. What should people do after they’ve been called such a thing? Can the self-esteem of even the most spiritual Christian survive a call to repent?

I submit that the Bible provides direction for a brood of vipers with no place to go.

Sin has been an enduring concern for people ever since a conversation with a serpent took that unfortunate turn way back when in the Garden of Eden. (God's views on the subject have probably not gotten any rosier over the years, either.) Even though God and people agree that sin is bad and as troubling and persistent as sin is – we don't hear many calls to "repent". The word "repent" is only slightly more common in modern worship services than snake-handling – and is possibly more dangerous. It is not that God's people are any more optimistic about human goodness or that they are more tolerant of sin. They just aren't convinced that repentance is an appropriate way to deal with it.

John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Christ by exhorting his wilderness congregation to repent. After the earthly ministry of Jesus, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to the Church and Saint Peter repeated the instructions to repent. In spite of that exalted history, anyone who issues a call to repent these days can expect, at best, to be ignored.

We acknowledge the destructive effects of sin and recognize that sin pervades all of life, but we have subtly redefined it. Sin is now attributed to a series of poor choices, mis-chances, or, at worst, a personality disorder. We reduce it to a size that can be managed with common-sense advice, a pep talk, and, perhaps, counseling. It's nothing more than a bad temper or the kids getting in trouble at school or someone else not taking us seriously enough. Sin is rarely understood to be separation from God.

In a culture of self-help and the unquestioned goal of strong self-esteem (regardless of the self's merits), repentance is often considered irrelevant – possibly even damaging. The word "repent" is more often associated with self-righteous fanatics than with the strengthening guidance of the Church. A call to change can be quickly dismissed as intolerance.

The modern ear (and the defensive ego that's listening with it) hears the word "repent" and fails to recognize the voice of God's grace. It sounds like guilt and we don't come to church to feel guilty. A call to guilt instead of hope is a misappropriation of the word "repent". The sainted term, repent, has been reduced to doing nothing more than enforcing morality. Good people cherish the expectation that saying "repent" will make it sound more religious when all they're really doing is trying to straighten other people out.

Whatever misgivings God's people may have about the concept of repentance, God does not share them. The word has always been a forward-looking call to future ministry, not a rehearsal of past regrets. "Repent" is an invocation of hope, and the greatest events in the history of God's people have always begun when it is heard among the faithful. God ushered in the ministry of Jesus Christ with John the Baptist's call to repent. The Church was inaugurated on Pentecost as Saint Peter said, "Repent." God offers the same inspiration for new beginnings today.

When grace kicks off the covers, brews up some coffee, and gets to work – the first thing it says is, "Repent!" That is God's answer to the sinner's well-warranted, but incapacitating, tears and guilt. Do you feel guilty? Trying to convince yourself that you're not really sinful is not an honest response. We can't explain away sin and we can't pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We can only depend upon God's grace.

When we recognize our sinfulness, God doesn't try to talk us out of our recognition. Instead, God has something to do about it. He gives us inspiration and strength to repent and change our lives.

The ministry of Christ is not to affirm us the way we are. It is to call us to be better and to share God's grace with a world that needs to be changed by that grace.

It would be a misplaced hope to rely on God's nonchalance about sin; history and experience tell us otherwise. God's awful mindfulness of sin prevents any possibility of our

trusting positive thinking or self-help books as adequate remedies for all of the things we need to change about our souls. Only forgiveness is powerful enough to renew God's people and lead us into the future.

As always, it is repentance that begins the ministry of Christ and the work of the Church. Every hungry person fed, undeserved dollar given, well-loved hymn sung, thankful prayer prayed, new idea considered, and boring person listened to is the joyful work of a sinner who has heard the call to repent. And that sinner has known that sin is too profound, life is too precious, and the work of the Church is too important to do anything else but repent.

And in that sinner's new life – the work of Christ that began on the Jordan River continues.