

Embracing the Christ of Christmas  
“Repent”  
Matthew 3:1-12

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There are nineteen more shopping days until Christmas. The big Christmas parade is past. The decorations are up. The parties are on. It's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas. In the midst of jingle bells and Santa Claus, we find our way to church hoping to hear a few strains of “Silent Night.”

Instead, we are shocked to our senses by a pit bull-type preacher shouting REPENT FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR! Who is this back roads guy with no degrees, no titles, and not many clothes, whose only distinction seems to be his taste for Fear Factor food? Well, his name is John the Baptist and while only Matthew and Luke tell about the birth stories of Jesus, all four gospels report the preaching of John the Baptist. What message does this head-pounding, axe-throwing, name-calling, fire-flaming preacher have for us? It's contained in one word. That word is REPENT.

**REPENTANCE: WHAT IS IT?**

To repent is to turn around. It is a change of mind followed by a change of life. You cannot reach your desired destination by traveling faster in the wrong direction. Life demands U-turns.

Several years ago our family was vacationing in Virginia when I found myself on the right road traveling in the wrong direction. Had I been smarter, I would have proceeded to the next exit, crossed over and returned. But, I've never been patient about anything and particularly not about driving. When I spotted an emergency crossover, I immediately pulled in only to find myself sitting under a NO U-TURN sign bumper to bumper with the Virginia Highway Patrol. “Sir, did you see that sign?” asked the trooper. “I'm vacationing here from Kentucky,” I replied. “Furthermore, the place I need to be is back there.” The trooper heard my plea and let me go. Sometimes the best we can do is stop, turn around, and go back. That is what repentance is.

Repentance is a change of mind. The Greek word is *metanoia*. *Meta* means to change, as in metamorphosis. *Nous* means mind, our innermost consciousness. To repent is to change your mind. Repentance is not blabbing our secrets or diminishing our self-worth; it is insight and understanding. There were things once clear in my mind that I no longer believe to be true: people different from me are to be feared, I know just how you feel, and life is a just employer; she gives you what you ask.

Repentance is a change of life. The Hebrew word for repent is *shoov*. It means to turn. Psalm 80:3, 7, 19 says, “*Turn us again, O God of hosts, and cause thy face*

*to shine, and we shall be saved.*” Samuel confronts Saul and says, *“To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”* Repenting is more than just saying the right words; it’s living the right life.

### **REPENTANCE: WHO NEEDS IT?**

Sinners need to repent. *“People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River”* (verse 5).

Charles Wesley expressed it well in “Come Sinners to the Gospel Feast”:

Come all ye souls by sin oppressed,  
ye restless wanderers after rest;  
ye poor, and maimed, and halt and blind,  
in Christ a hearty welcome find.

Sinners make the evening news: Those who cheat Tenn Care, those who pose falsely as police officers, those who rape and rob, those who assault and abuse others, those who peddle drugs and take advantage of teens. Sometimes we need to stop talking about symptoms and start talking about sin. Sin breaks the heart of God and destroys the lives of people we love.

Some of you here today are being unfaithful to your spouse, lying to your boss, cheating on your expense accounts, addicted to alcohol, gambling, drugs, or sex. If you are cheating in school or sleeping around as a teenager, it’s time to stop and turn around. Your life and the lives of others are dependent on it. Sometimes we just need to repent.

The righteous need to repent. *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance”* (verse 7). Here John goes for full discourse. You who are the most religious, you who are in your pews every Sunday, you need to repent, too! Ouch! Whoa! But that’s what he says. I didn’t write this sermon; John the Baptist wrote it.

We live in the richest, most powerful country on earth. We police other nations without their consent and employ their workers for a fraction of what we would pay our own. Lord, have mercy on us. We throw away more food each year than some small nations produce. Lord, have mercy on us. We have no rivals when it comes to plundering the environment of the earth. Lord, have mercy on us. While most Americans continue to cherish the illusion that we live in a classless, equal opportunity society, our courts, our prisons, our public assistance programs and our schools tell a different story. May the Lord have mercy on us.

Meanwhile, we fill our churches with nice people offering them every activity under the sun so they can feel better about themselves and ward off the inner whine of loneliness. May the Lord have mercy on us. Maybe it’s time to

reconsider that first vow of membership: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world and repent of your sins? We've all pondered that question. I ask you today to ponder it again.

### **REPENTANCE: HOW CAN I?**

Historically, there are four movements to repentance. The first is recognition. Are you ready to get real? This all has to do with being real. King David cried to the Lord, "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me*" (Psalm 51:1-3). Are you ready to be honest? Are you ready to come out of denial? Are you ready to stop pretending? Then you are ready to repent.

Repentance is remorse. In a Hank Ketchum cartoon, *Dennis the Menace* says in saying his prayers one night, "I'm sorry, Lord, but I have a whole bunch of 'I'm sorrys' for you tonight." Six of the hardest words in the English language are "I was wrong; I am sorry." These words stick in strong men's throats and cause women to blush. But, if we're going to turn around, we're going to have to find the ability to say, "I was wrong, I'm sorry." "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation."

Repentance is renewal or to use a better word, replacement. The only way to break an old habit is to replace it with a better one. Oh, the explosive power of new affection. We need to not only get rid of sin, but put on Christ. We need to not only put off the old self, but we need to put on the new self; we need to turn from destructive behaviors and put on healthy behaviors.

Jesus told a story about that. In fact, He had just cast out a demon. When demons are cast out they have to find a place to go. While wandering around trying to find a resting place, the demon discovers its former residence all swept and clean, but empty. So, it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself and inhabits the man leaving him worse than he was before. Don't just clean house; replace it with something better. Be filled with the Spirit.

We can find repentance in the process of restitution. The Federal Government for years has maintained a conscience fund. Currently there's 7 million dollars in it along with lots of letters. One letter goes like this: "I'm sending \$10 for blankets I stole while in WWII. My mind could not rest. Sorry I am so late." It was written February 6, 1974. Are there letters you need to write, calls you need to make, and conversations you need to have before it's too late? Today is the day to think about that.

Carl Sandburg begins one of his poems by saying, "Could we be honest for five minutes even though this is Chicago?" Even though this is Brentwood and we are United Methodists, could we be honest for five minutes?

What have we done and left undone that is hurting someone else? What are we doing or failing to do that keeps us from fulfilling our God-given potential? What habits are hurting us and others that we need by God's grace to break today?

Do you remember that old invitation to Holy Communion? "You that do truly and earnestly repent of your sin and are in love and charity with your neighbors and intend to lead a new life following the commandments of God, draw near with faith and make your humble confession to Almighty God. John the Baptist says, it's time to repent. May it be such a day for all of us.