

Should America Repent?

Matthew 3:1-12

December 9, 2001

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Responding to a sermon I preached two weeks ago about religious signs on rural roads, someone said to me on the way out of church, “The sign I remember seeing was, GET READY TO MEET GOD.” We had those signs in Kentucky, too. As we think about building a highway from Chaos to Christ this Advent, we would do well to hear again the words of the prophet John, who encouraged us and warned us to GET READY TO MEET GOD.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR.” For nearly 400 years the prophets had been silent. There was no word from the Lord. People were left to do their own thing and find their own way. Now, looking a lot like Elijah of old, John packs them in down by the Jordan River, baptizing people in the water of repentance. If we really want to get ready for Christ this Christmas, we might do well to repent.

Let us talk today about this religious word, REPENTANCE. I would like to unpack that word. It was the word of John. It was the first sermon of Jesus. Repent. What relevance does it have for the average person in the 21st century? Let us understand what it means.

REPENTANCE, WHAT IS IT?

In Hebrew, the word is TESHUBAH. In Greek, the word is METANÓIA. In both languages, it means “to turn.” *To repent* is a move to reconsider. *To repent* is a change of direction. In military terms, *to repent* is to do an about face. *To repent* is to make a U-turn.

Several years ago, we were on a family vacation in Virginia. Trying to find our hotel, 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. I have never been a patient driver. Finding an emergency cross-over in the median, I immediately took it, only to find myself bumper-to-bumper with a highway patrolman sitting under a **No U-Turn** sign. The trooper got out of his cruiser, walked over to my car, and said, “Didn’t you see the sign that is right here by your window?” “I’m from Kentucky,” I replied. “Furthermore, I am on vacation and the place I am supposed to be is back there.” He looked at me for a long time and with a great sense of grace said, “Just go on back to the hotel where you belong.”

On God’s highway, U-turns are not only permissible, they are desirable, important, and absolutely necessary. You cannot get to where you need to be by traveling faster in the wrong direction. Someone here today needs to stop where

you are, turn around on your road of life and go in another way.

Repentance is a change of mind. It does not necessarily have much to do with emotions. It has to do with a change of mind that leads to a change of life. I wrote in the word, *repentance*, on the World Wide Web. Guess what I got back? I got the name of several rock bands, the names of two nightclubs in Texas and a website called "Confession World." Here you can post your confession and read the confessions of others, be they funny, serious, bizarre, raunchy or fantasy.

If babbling our sins were the constituted repentance, all society would be totally reformed. Never before, in the history of the world, have we wanted so much to announce our sins. On national television or on the internet, we are everywhere wanting to tell our secrets. I have news for you. That is not repenting. It may be voyeurism, but it is not repenting. John was more interested in people walking the walk than talking the talk. John says, if you think you can call on Abraham to save you from the ax of justice, forget it. Fruit reflects the root. It is time to bear the fruit of repentance.

Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of life. In a basketball game in 1989 between Michigan and Wisconsin, Rumeal Robinson stepped to the foul line at the end of the game and missed two free throws, which cost Michigan the game. Robinson felt awful. But, he did more than just feel awful. He did something about it. Every day after practice for the rest of the season, Robinson stayed and shot an extra 100 free throws. Some might remember the National Championship game of 1989. With three seconds left in overtime, Robinson stepped to the line and sunk two free throws, which gave Michigan the National Championship. You see, he was sorry, but he did something with his sorrow that made a difference for his team. That is the nature of repentance. It is a change of mind that leads to a change of life for the good of others!

REPENTANCE, WHO NEEDS IT?

V. 5 *People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.* When John realized a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up because it was the popular thing to do, he exploded, *You brood of snakes! What do you think you are doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make a difference?* (The Message Bible) It is your life that must change, not just your skin.

That is hardly a speech that gets you named "Citizen of the Year" by the Chamber of Commerce. Yet, here is John the Baptist talking to the most important people in the community saying, you get in the same way everyone else gets in, the common folk, the rich folk, the poor folk, and all the rest of us. We all walk down the same road. It is the road called Repentance. *For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* We err and stray from God's ways like lost sheep. We follow the devices and desires of our own hearts too much. We miss the mark of our high calling. As Hank Ketchum puts it in a *Dennis the Menace* cartoon as

Dennis is saying his prayers, “I’m sorry, Lord, but I’ve got a whole bunch of □I’m sorry’s□ for you tonight.” I have been there with Dennis many times, haven’t you? Repentance fits faulty people.

If you have it all worked out, if you never miss the mark, if you do it all right all the time, then, go on home, you do not need to hear the rest of the sermon. But, if you are like the rest of us, if your desires, dreams, hopes, and aspirations are far off the mark of your high calling, then, you belong in this community of the wounded and repenting.

Will Willimon tells about visiting with a professor at Duke Medical School who said, “I give thanks to God everyday that I am a Lutheran, not just any Lutheran, but a Missouri Synod Lutheran. We take sin very seriously. Every morning when I walk toward the medical school with all its grandiosity, I say to the Lord, ‘a lot of good things are going to happen here today. While we are busy helping people there will be some mistakes. People will be overlooked. Someone is going to get hurt. Lord forgive us.’” “You are thankful for that,” said Willimon. “Yes, because I meet a lot of people who are not Lutheran, or for that matter, not religious at all. They think they have to get everything right every time. When they fail, they have no place to go except to wallow in their guilt.” Oh, what relief it is to know we can repent.

Did you mess up this week? Did you miss the mark? Did you fail to do something you should have done? Did you do something, that in the long run, you regretted and you are sorry about? You have come to the right place. This is where these things get dealt with, even in the middle of December.

REPENTANCE, WHEN IS IT NECESSARY?

Should America repent? While I do not support a theology that makes God a partner with Osama bin Laden in trying to teach America a lesson, I do subscribe to a theology that no one should let a trouble go to waste. Whatever the challenge you face in life, do not let that moment go to waste. You ought to learn something from it. If you are fighting some disease, you ought to learn something from it. If you are going through some relational difficulty, you ought to learn something from it. America ought to learn something from the kind of turmoil we are living through in this particular period of history.

Out of these ashes, what lessons will we learn that will make us a better people? What *turning* shall we do that will make us a better society than before September 11th? Maybe it is time to change our minds and our lives concerning what is really important in the world.

On Monday people were fighting over public prayer.

On Tuesday, we prayed.

On Monday, we were separated by race, sex, color, and creed.

On Tuesday, we held hands.

On Monday, we argued with kids about picking up after themselves.

On Tuesday, we could hardly wait to get home from work to pick up our kids and hug them.

On Monday, we were obsessed with the sex lives of politicians.

On Tuesday, we joined hands with politicians to sing *God Bless America*.

On Monday, we were football fanatics.

On the following Sunday, we went to church because the football games were cancelled.

Do you remember? What should this teach us? In the long haul of life, we spend a lot of time on trivial things that do not matter in the light of eternity. We would be wise this Advent season, in this moment of reflection, to remember, deep in our souls what is really, really, valuable and important. It is necessary to repent when the trivial takes precedent over the eternal.

When is it necessary to repent? Maybe it is time to change our minds concerning the nature of SIGNIFICANCE in life. This is a test. Just think about your answers.

1. Name the last five Heisman trophy winners.
2. Name the last five winners of the Miss America Pageant.
3. Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners.

Very few of us remember the headliners of yesterday. They were the best in their field, but applause dies, awards tarnish, and achievements are forgotten.

Now, let me ask you another set of questions.

1. Name a teacher who inspired you in life.
2. Name three friends who will go with you to the end.
3. Name someone in your history and life who believed in you long before you believed in yourself.

I dare to say, someone comes to mind in every one of our hearts on each of these three questions. People who make a difference in our lives are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. Those who make a difference are the people who care; the people who have been there with us no matter the circumstances. Maybe it is time to change our concept of heroes from actors and athletes to firemen and friends, those who go in when the rest of the world is going out. Maybe it is time to repent!

Maybe it is time to repent of our SELF-SUFFICIENCY. For a brief moment we needed God and we flocked to places of worship to find Him. Worship attendance swelled the weekend of September 16th more than 25% nationwide. Polls now indicate that the wave of emotion has not translated into a life of devotion. Did churches fail in that process? Sociologist, George Barna, says the Church miserably failed to respond to seeking people. I'm sure we did. I have no doubt about that. The sermon of September 16th was the hardest sermon I have preached in all my life. But, I am not sure I agree with Mr. Barna. I think there is something else happening. When it comes right down to it, I think there is something in human nature that leaves us thinking we would rather be god than serve God. We would rather clone humans in our image than surrender ourselves to be shaped into the image of God. We had better be careful on the slippery

slope of moral fortitude when we start playing with cloning human beings. When is repentance necessary? When we have missed the mark, that is when it is necessary.

REPENTANCE, HOW DO WE DO IT?

It is our theology that not even repentance is our own doing.

The power to repent is a gift of God. *I baptize you with water*, said John, *but one more powerful than I is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* We begin to repent by the power of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit of the Living God settles upon our lives we can do the undo-able, face the unface-able, and bear the unbearable. As surely as the Spirit of God moved over the chaos of creation in the beginning of time, so it is that the Spirit of the Living God can sweep across your soul bringing creation and order out of the chaos you feel down in the depths of your being. That is the promise. Let the Spirit of the Living God settle on your soul today. That is my prayer.

How do we repent? We repent by stepping into the Refiner's fire. Dross must be consumed for the gold to be refined. I know nothing about metals, but I am told there is a dramatic moment when the refiner knows that the dross is gone. The silver becomes a liquid mirror in which the image of the refiner is reflected in the silver. The refiner can see his own face when it is pure. What a lesson.

Steve Green sings in a contemporary song:

The Refiner's fire, has become my desire

Purged and cleansed and purified.

That the Lord might be glorified.

To be filled, cleansed and refined, that is the route of repentance.

Carl Sandburg begins one of his poems by saying, "Could we be honest for five minutes, even in Chicago?" I would like to say, even in Brentwood, as United Methodists, could we be honest for just a moment? What have you done and left undone that is hurting you or someone else? What attitudes must change in your mind and heart for there to be room for Christ? What habits of life need to rise to a higher level in order that you can become what God has created you to be? In your heart, will you give a truthful answer?

America, America, May God thy gold refine

Till all success is nobleness, and every gain Divine. Amen.

