

12.4.2022 Advent 2

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Isaiah 11:1-10 Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

“The Fruits of Repentance”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Like many of you I enjoy seeing all sorts of Christmas decorations go up around this city and its various communities. There really are all sorts of displays, from minimalist simple white lights, to red and white candy canes shaped around tree trunks, angels, nativity scenes, and of course, an array of seasonal inflatables like Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. On the way home from church the other night, I even saw an inflatable Grinch in front of someone's home – that was the only decoration in the yard, only Mr. Grinch. It warmed my heart to see it.

However, there's one character that I have never seen in someone's yard, and doubt I ever will – an inflatable John the Baptist. If Mr. Grinch is sort of the snarky counterpoint to holiday cheer, John the Baptist's message of repentance seems so stark that many people today probably wouldn't even associate John the Baptist with Christmas.

Yet John's message of repentance is a theme that we need to hear again and again in order to understand the profound joy of the Christmas message. The trouble is that the word John uses to describe turning toward God - “repentance” - is very misunderstood today. All this word really means, is simply a change of heart about ourselves, allowing us to encounter God's grace anew. John's message about repentance is, however, very timely. John is asking us to change our mind about things – about people and about ourselves. We need to give Christ a chance to change how we look at ourselves and our neighbors.

Though Christmas is a time of cultural cheer, this time of the year is also not the most joyful time of the year for everyone. The holidays can very definitely be a “blue” season, when people struggle to make ends meet, and when families may not always get along. In the midst of all of the joyful expectations, people can also become irritable and impatient. Nations continue to be at war with one another, and even if we as a nation are not at war, we are often at one another's political throats. Homelessness, hunger and injustice accompany us during a season that we have commercialized into an often very self-centered time of the year.

Advent is a time to remember “the reason for the season” – to remember the awaited coming of the Messiah, who is the living reality of peace and reconciliation between God and humanity. Today's words of Isaiah about the wolf living in peace with the lamb, and the lion with the calf, are

prophetic words we need to hear again and again. John's call to repentance is a call to grasp again God's vision of peace and reconciliation for a world where the strong will no longer prey upon the poor and the weak.

Today's reading from Romans reminds us why we reread the scriptures – it is to be encouraged with a message of hope that God is steadfast and always near to us in the living Christ. During Advent, we need to hear again John's invitation, *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."*

Hunger, poverty and oppression were also part of the world to which Isaiah, John the Baptist and Paul all spoke. At the time of John the Baptist, Rome occupied Israel, oppressing the weak, and peace was created only with military might. John's message was sudden and urgent, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near... Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."* People heard John's message of a different kingdom, one of peace made not with war, one realized with the reconciliation of God.

People seeking God's forgiveness, and a new start, came to John at the Jordan, and John baptized them – the sinful, the poor, and the oppressed. Yet John saved his harshest words for the religious elite who were probably not that interested in repentance, and were proud of their ancestry and heritage. John said to them, *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance."* When John saw the religious elite lining up for baptism, he saw through their false piety, saying, *"Bear fruit worthy of repentance."* Indeed, later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus would also call the Pharisees and scribes, *"Serpents and a brood of vipers"* (Mt. 23:33) because, though they outwardly worshiped God, they were descended from religious leaders who had persecuted and killed the prophets – and who also desired to kill him.

This is why John's words to them are so powerful – *"Do not presume to say of yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor...'"* John was essentially saying, "You cannot lean on your ancestry of tribe and nation expecting to find grace. Repent, change your way of thinking, and return to God." John's words are harsh, but they are a necessary beginning to truth-telling about ourselves. *"Bear the fruit of repentance"* means a turning away from all the trappings of religion, nation and ancestry that people use to make themselves feel superior to others. Rather, we are to work for peace and reconciliation with God's help, not the help of war, nation and empire.

John was evoking Isaiah's vision of peace and reconciliation – a time of harmony when the wolf will live with the lamb, and the lion with the calf. It is a vision we still need to hear, for it gives us

hope that we too might bear such fruits of repentance. Today's reading from Romans describes what the fruit of repentance looks like: "*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*" This is the fruit of repentance that welcomes others, not for profit or political advantage, but solely out of love for the glory of God.

Advent is a time to return to God; John calls us to a repentance that is honest about ourselves. John says, "*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.*" John's words are words of humility and repentance. In John's gospel, he says, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:33). John the Baptist models what it means to die to ourselves so that Christ and his kingdom might increase in us. Advent is about seeing ourselves with honesty before God.

John let go of everything so that Christ might increase in him and, through him, in the world. Repentance is a letting go of what I want or what I have built, so that with God's grace, God might use each of us in building his kingdom in this broken world. Repentance is a change of heart and a change of mind that leads to peace and reconciliation with ourselves and others.

Paul describes repentance, writing, "*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*" Life isn't all about me; it is about living for others as Christ lives for each of us. Allowing Christ to increase in us, leads to us to welcome those who are profoundly different; the fruits of repentance are reconciliation and peace with others. To be the church means welcoming others as Christ has welcomed us.

John's baptism was an invitation to be renewed and reconciled with God. This is how we celebrate Advent, we don't simply "go to church" – we must be the church – we must live out the profound welcome of Christ for others. We must decrease from all that our culture says we should be, of who we should accept, of who is in and who is out, so that in us and in our church, the Christ who welcomes all increases in us and in our fellowship. To do so, is to welcome the kingdom of God.

Advent is a time to return to God. May Christ increase in you.

Advent is a time to welcome others, as Christ has welcomed you. Amen.