



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 13, 2007

Midweek Advent Worship

Matthew 3:1-3

Pastor Randy Ott

Lesson: Isaiah 59:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 6

Gospel: Matthew 3:1-3

### Repentance

Somewhere between 10 and 15 years ago on a Sunday in December, I just finished the 10:30 service at the church that I lived next to and I was standing in the middle aisle, greeting people as they walked out from church. I don't remember the man's name and I'm probably thankful that I don't, but when he got to me, he shook my hand. He didn't say good morning. He looked at me with a snarl and said, "Don't you know Christmas is coming? Why all this talk about repentance?" I guess I should have done Advent Necessities as an Advent series there, huh?

Maybe you have had the same thought? You drive home from work today or you drive here tonight and you have the Christmas station on and it's playing "Jingle Bells," then you come into church and see a Christmas tree, see lights, see pretty colors, and then you have to sing "From Depths of Woe I Cry to You." What a spoil sport. Don't you know Christmas is coming, Pastor? Some Scrooge you are, huh? Do you ever think that during the season of Advent? I know at least one man did because he tried to take a bite of my rear end he was so upset about it.

Why is Advent a necessity? Why has the church, from the beginning of celebrating the season of Advent, connected repentance to preparation for Christ's coming? The church, when it's at its best, reflects God, right? When the church is at its best, it doesn't make up its own messages. It reflects God's message. John the Baptist is probably not any figure in any one of your manger scenes, but he is probably a little bit closer to the manger scene than the wise men that you might have there. John the Baptist was the one who was the Way Preparer, the one that was prophesied about 700 years before Christ was born, through the prophet Isaiah. Then when he came, when Jesus was going to begin his ministry, John prepared the people for his coming out, so to speak, and his public ministry by preaching "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Repentance has always been connected with Christ's coming. Even in the reading that we just read from another part of Isaiah and in other parts of the Old Testament, the promises of the Savior are connected with repentance. And it only stands to reason doesn't it? If our Savior's coming is nothing more than sentimental mush (which is what there is a lot of pressure from the world around us to make of it), there is no need for repentance. Then we just sing happy songs, we exchange gifts, we throw away the wrapping paper, and we move on. But, if as Christians who are in the world but not of the world, we pause and we ask ourselves, "Why did God allow himself to be born?"

Why did he have his head laid where there was a bunch of cow saliva? Why did he do that?” It’s because we are sinners. He came into this world to be born because you and I are sinners who are in desperate need of a Savior. If we forget the message of repentance, then we don’t see the need for a Savior. And there is a lot of pressure from the world around us to not think of peace on earth as something that is between God and man, but just sentimental peace on earth. We need this constant reminder, and our God gives it to us over and over in Scripture, that we are desperate, desperate sinners in need of a Savior. God does that by calling us to repentance.

That is what makes repentance a necessary part of Advent and a necessary part of the Christian life. In fact, Luther said the Christian life is nothing more than daily repentance. Not just during Advent, but year round.

Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. Think about what that word “repent” means. Why would God be calling us to repentance to prepare ourselves for Jesus’ birth? Sometimes I think we use the word “repent” as in just “be sorry for our sins,” but there is another fancy church word for that. It’s “contrition.” To be sorry for your sins is to be contrite. We want contrite and repentant hearts. Repentance goes beyond just being sorry. It goes beyond contrition. Judas betrayed Jesus. Judas was sorry. Judas was contrite. He flung the money across the room where those guys were, trying to give it back, but that couldn’t take the stain of his sin away no matter how sorry he was, no matter how many tears he shed and no matter how tight he tightened the noose. It couldn’t take away his sins. Being sorry doesn’t take the sins away.

Repentance is what takes away sin, and repentance involves being sorry for sin and then also trusting that the baby that was born in Bethlehem is the adult who lived perfectly in our place and then carried all of our sins to the cross at Calvary, died, was buried, and rose again. Repentance involves seeing that we are sinners and trusting that in Christ our sins are taken away. Repentance is seeing our sins, being sorry for them, and throwing them at the foot of the cross. Repentance is the work of God because you and I are sinful human beings and we are dead in our trespasses and sins. Dead means dead. Spiritually dead is spiritually powerless. We can’t come to repentance on our own unless God works it in our hearts through the law and through the gospel. Then we see that we are sinners, but we also see our Savior.

So when Scripture says, if we repent, God is faithful, don’t give yourselves credit for that repentance. Even that is God’s work because God, the Spirit living in us, is the one who works us to that repentance—not only to see our sins, but to trust that in Christ, they are forgiven.

So preparing the way for the Savior, making straight paths for him, is what Isaiah had said in Chapter 40 that is quoted here. There it goes on to say every valley will be raised up and every mountain made low. It’s kind of like God is talking about the road to our hearts is going to be leveled through this preaching of law and gospel, of repentance. The valley is filled in. The mountains made low. The curb is straightened out so that the Savior comes, straight to our heart through the law and through the gospel.

John the Baptist was a Way Preparer as he preached repentance. You and I today are Way Preparers as we preach the law and the gospel.

During the Advent season and every season of the year, as I said earlier, every day of the year, we ought to be repentant. We ought to look at our lives and see our sins. And each one of us knows our own sins. We know where we have hated. We know where we have gossiped. We know where we have grumbled. We know where we have bickered and been bitter. We know where we have accused God, where we have told God we know better than he does. We know all that individually, and we need to know it and continue to see it so that the way is straight for God to assure us of our forgiveness as we place those sins on Christ.

What I would like you think about for a minute, as a congregation, one of the things in general that maybe we should repent of, especially as it is connected to being Way Preparers—it's a general statement and I know it's not true for every one of us; there are some that do this, but about a month or so ago on a Friday night, we had the kids put on their three plays, and it was really entertaining. It was really interesting to watch. The gym was full of a couple hundred people sitting there listening to our children put on different plays. The next morning we had a workshop—how to share your faith with your friends, how to earn the right to be heard, how to speak the gospel so they don't rot in hell forever. It wasn't quite 200 that was in attendance. There was myself, two members of the Outreach Committee who was hosting it, and one other person. We even had goodies and treats, and you didn't have to sit for an hour on the bleachers either. We had other chairs. You could get up and move around. You look at the amount of time and energy that we put into ministering to 15% of our congregation. I'm not saying that it's not important, but as a congregation, do we also put time and energy into sharing the gospel with those who are going to hell?

God says to love your neighbor as yourself, not just love your children as yourself. It's good and right that we should minister to our children. God has called us to do that, but it's not an either/or. And the question I would have is, at times do we, as a congregation, act as though it is an either/or? We are doing ministry to our children. We don't need to reach out with the gospel. We don't need to learn how to share the gospel with others. We pay someone else to do that. If those thoughts are ever lurking in our hearts anywhere, I would say the Lord is calling us to repent—to turn away from that sin and throw it on Christ and find forgiveness for it. But you might say you train up a child in the way he should go and when he is older, he will not depart from it. I firmly believe it. God says it. But could it be that, as a congregation, we are training up a child in the way that he should go so that when he turns 14, God's Word is no longer important, that it's only for the school children. It's not for adults. It's not for sharing with those who aren't a part of our congregation.

Is that how we are training a child in the way he should go? It's a valid question. I don't know about you, but there are times when I am not eager to share the gospel with someone who looks different than me, smells different than me, or dresses different than me. I'm a sinner. I'm selfish. I don't want to put myself out there. I don't like being rejected. I don't like being put down or laughed at for what I believe. I don't always do it as faithfully as I could, and I would wager that neither do you.

So what is the answer? Start grumbling about that pastor that points out that sin? I think about that man that was so upset with me preaching repentance, my assumption was that I must have hit some sin that he was caught up in and didn't want to admit and that was why he was ornery that Sunday morning. The answer is always repentance. It's something we need to proclaim to each other and to ourselves—not to make excuses, but to simply say “Lord, you have loved me even though I have failed you, even though I have gossiped, even though I have grumbled, even though I have made excuses, even though I have shied away from opportunities and changed the subject. Lord, you still love me and have taken away my sins. Lord, your love is always there for me, even when I fail you. You hate sin. You hate the sinner and yet, at the same time, you love the sinner.”

That is the amazing message of our God. He says in the Book of Psalms that he hates sin and hates the sinner and yet he so loved the world that he was born, he lived, he died, he rose again, and he sent the Spirit into our hearts through other people that were willing to proclaim repentance and prepare the way so that the Spirit could work in us.

Now God has called us to proclaim that amazing message—hate-love, forgiveness-grace, law-gospel. We don't have to make excuses. We have to live in the newness of the One who forgives our sins.