

Sermon: "Repentance and Renewal"

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First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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SKIPPING CHRISTMAS

This past Thanksgiving I had the opportunity to read John Grisham's amusing little book entitled *Skipping Christmas*. It was the story of a couple named Luther and Nora Krank whose only daughter was not going to be home for Christmas. She would be serving in the Peace Corps in Peru.

Luther, an accountant by trade, had long despised the money they wasted during the Christmas season (about \$6,000 last year by his estimate). So, Luther decided that this year they would do something different. No more gaudy decorations, no more spending sprees at the mall, and no more wasteful parties. This year they were going to skip all that. This year they were going to skip Christmas.

My wife was the one who encouraged me to read that book. I think I sometimes remind her of Luther Krank. Every year the story is the same with me. She (and some of you) get to hear my tirade about the Christmas season. Every year I make the same speech.

This is the year that we do things differently. This is the year that we repent of our Christmas gluttony and go in a different direction. Of course, no matter what I say, it always comes out the same. Despite my best efforts, I, along with everyone else I know, gets caught up in the craziness that is the Christmas season. We spend even more money than the year before, and it seems like there are two parties to attend for every night of the week.

I wonder. Is it even possible to change? Is it even possible to really repent of past sins and go in a different direction in this season or any season for that matter? Is repentance possible?

A CHANGE OF DIRECTION

That's what repentance means you know. Repentance means going in a different direction. The word comes from an ancient nomadic time, a time before the creation of many roads or maps. In those days, a person traveling in the wilderness must readily be willing to repent because moving through the wilderness in the wrong direction could get you hopelessly lost. Repentance was a matter of salvation of life and death.

When a person noticed that he or she had lost their bearings that the familiar landmarks were gone, it was time to repent, to go in a different direction. Time was of the essence. The sooner that person said, "I'm going in the wrong direction," and turned around, the higher the survival rate.

So it is with us from a spiritual standpoint. Time is of the essence when we are lost in the wilderness. The sooner we realize that we are going in the wrong direction, the sooner we can find deliverance.

I believe that from time to time all of us have to take stock of our lives and ask, "Am I going in the right direction? Am I going where God wants me to go?" Such questions are necessary if we are to avoid getting hopelessly lost in the maze of activities and things that vie for our attention every day.

I believe it is possible to repent. I believe that we do not have to continue in the same wrong direction day after day ... year after year.

Indeed, each year in the church we prepare for the coming of the Messiah with a season of repentance. We call that season Advent. Each year at Advent we are reminded that change is always possible.

No matter how high the mountains or how deep the valleys in our life, God goes before us preparing the way. God, our Scripture tells us, goes through the wilderness and lops off the mountaintops. God fills in the valleys. This is a metaphorical way of talking about the possibility of repentance. It is God who makes repentance possible. What would be impossible for even the most seasoned roadbuilder is not a problem for the Lord who created the heavens and the earth.

A WILDERNESS ROAD

Trouble is the road to repentance is a wilderness road ... a highway in the desert. In other words, God makes repentance or going in a new direction possible but quite often the direction in which God would have us go is not the way that we would choose. Our plans often clash with God's plans.

Today we try to plan our Christmas activities down to the last detail. Today Christmas is a season of coordinated schedules and deadlines to meet. Christmas is a season of the predictable. Familiar hymns, familiar foods and familiar stories. This is Christmas as we know and love it.

But, that was not the case with that first Christmas. Oh no, the appearance of God's glory in the child Jesus did not bring about the warm fuzzy feelings of the familiar. That appearance was unsettling. It brought about expressions of fear and misunderstanding.

This foreshadowed, of course how things would be throughout the ministry of this unusual Messiah. His path was never the familiar conventional road. No, the road of Jesus was always found in the desert of radical change that can also be called repentance.

Some people might say that change is good. But, in my experience very few people really believe that line ... especially when it comes to the change that Jesus brings. The change, the repentance that Jesus represented was, from the very beginning, threatening to people. From the very beginning, people wanted to skip Christmas at least the kind of Christmas which really came in Jesus.

And I think that's still true. We may say that we want the hope of Christmas, that we want God in our lives. But, many of us are unwilling to enter the desert to receive that hope. We might be willing to have a "makeover" this Christmas fine tune who we are maybe lose a little weight or exercise a little more ... something like that.

But, to really change radically and completely? That's too threatening. That's too much to ask for most of us. But, that's what God in Christ does indeed ask of us. That's what the preaching of John the Baptist in the desert was all about. His baptism of repentance was about more than just changing a few little problems here and there. His baptism was about a whole new life.

COMING HOME TO THE PROMISED LAND

Now, the people to whom John first preached had long heard stories about such change. They knew from their history that a whole new life was possible. Lately things hadn't been so good, but they could remember a time. The Jews remembered a time when God had formed a highway of hope and change for His people, a time when He delivered them from slavery in Egypt and eventually gave them a home in the promised land.

God's people also remembered the time that they had been taken from the promised land exiled in Babylon for many long years.

God said to a captive people through the prophet Isaiah,
"You don't have to stay where you are. You can leave Babylon. You can go back home because the highway is being prepared by God himself."

And that's just how it happened. God did the impossible. Once again God brought his people home through the desert. But, not all of God's people came home mind you. Indeed, most stayed in Babylon ... the city that they knew and had grown to love. They asked with disdain, "Who ever heard of roads in the desert? We need to be satisfied with where we are and who we are right now."

And yet some had the courage to go. Some believed in the promises of God more than in the threats of the present. They made the journey back through the desert to the promised land.

And that journey through the wilderness is a picture of what repentance is all about. It is somehow finding the courage and the humility each year to risk going in a different direction ... to find in the swirl of often chaotic and discouraging events the call of God and the true meaning of discipleship.

ADVENT REVIVAL

Someone asked this week if we did revivals in the Presbyterian Church. My first inclination was to say something like, "No, we don't believe in stuff like that." But, a minister friend pointed out that Advent, properly understood, can function as a kind of revival each and every year. Each Advent we ponder how where we've been in the past year is far from where God would have us be. Each year at Advent we discover anew that we've been captives in a foreign land a place filled with false gods that have us in their clutches.

But, the good news of Advent is that we don't have to stay in captivity. God long ago in the child Jesus invaded our world and the effects of that invasion continue to be felt. Each year as we contemplate the incarnation we are reminded that God is not far away. God is with us. God is close. God is preparing the way leading us gently to the place of salvation.

You see, we in the Presbyterian Church (along with others) do not believe that salvation is a one time experience. We don't believe that you "get saved" in a dramatic conversion and that's it. We believe that salvation is a continuing drama in which each year we learn in a deeper way the implications of what it means to be saved by God through Jesus Christ. Each year we learn in a greater way what it means to be conformed to the image of God in Christ Jesus.

So, each year at Advent we have a revival. We cultivate a sense of yearning, a sense of longing to be different from how we are and where we are today. That's the beginning of repentance this desire to be somewhere else.

But, yearning and desire are not enough.

Though God prepares the way in the desert, we must be willing to enter the desert. In the Old Testament the desert was known as the place where God met his people and called them to faithfulness. The desert was the portal of salvation, the experience that cemented the people of God together. The exodus through the desert always reminded God's people that they were chosen by God for salvation and service.

So, returning to the desert is symbolic of returning to God. Returning to the desert is a way of preparing for the coming of God in Christ.

In that sense all of us must be willing to enter the desert. It is only in the desert that we find that strange prophet named John preaching a word of repentance. And that is the word we need to hear.

If we are to experience the power of God in our lives, we too must take that word of repentance seriously. We must take it seriously enough to actually do something about it. We too must be willing to take the risk of entering the desert. We too must be willing to leave behind the comfortable surroundings of the city. We too must be willing to abandon the familiar places and ideas.

Repentance is not just a matter of saying something new. Repentance is a matter of doing something new. Repentance is asking honestly, "Does God want me to go somewhere different today?"

Almost always I believe the answer is "yes."

REPENTANCE, A CLEANSING FOR EVERYONE

But where would God have us go? I guess in some ways the answer is always different depending upon where we are right now and the particular plan that God has for our lives. But, there are also similarities in the call of God themes that keep reoccurring because all of us, in the final analysis are in the same boat when it comes to the need for change.

The call of God always involves a call to moral purity. Baptism involves a cleansing, a washing away of sins and the old way of life.

For those of us who have been brought up in the Christian Church, this connection between repentance, baptism and forgiveness flows together very nicely. But, for the Jews who first heard John's message, it was a radically new concept.

The Jew had no reason to be cleansed; he was already a child of Abraham. Baptism was for the Gentile converts. This was new and radical thinking; dangerous thinking. All the more dangerous because John was drawing large crowds, people wanted to be cleansed, they wanted something new. That made John a threat to the religious and political establishment. If all were in need of cleansing, if all needed to be baptized in the waters of the Jordan, then no one could claim the moral high ground before God.

In John's day sin was defined by the religious and political leaders as something that someone else did. It's easy to identify the sins of our enemies. It's easy to set up the laws of church and state so that by definition we're in the right and they're in the wrong. That's how it was when John preached.

But, John said, "You've got it all wrong. The message is not "we're right and they're wrong." The message is "we're all wrong." John was telling the "cleansed" that they still had body odor. They needed to get cleaned up before the king arrived!

Now it's a very dangerous thing to tell those who think that they are clean that they still have body odor especially when the "cleansed ones" are in charge of things. But, that's what John was doing. John was proclaiming by symbolic action what Paul later said in prose, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

This doctrine is expressed in the Presbyterian Church by a very powerful phrase, "total depravity." Now you might rightly say that this phrase sounds awfully pessimistic. And you would be right. When Presbyterians talk about total depravity, they mean it! Some Christian groups talk about sin as if it is largely a thing of the past once a person has an experience of conversion. Not Presbyterians. We believe that sin is a part of everyone and everything all the time.

When a terrible tragedy occurs in a nice neighborhood, the universal reaction is one of disbelief. People say, "I thought this was a nice neighborhood. I never thought anything like that could happen here." When a member of the clergy breaks the law and betrays the trust of his congregation, people cannot believe it has happened. They say, "How could he do something like that?" John would not be surprised by such things and neither should we. Sin and the need for repentance is a fact of life every day of our lives.

I've been reading a book that our high school class may study next semester. It's entitled, "Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt: A Theological Survival Guide for Youth, Parents, and Other Confused Presbyterians." (By the way, one of the authors of that book, Ted Foote, is an old fraternity mate from my days at Baylor University.) Anyway Ted and his friend who co-wrote the book, Alex Thornburg had this to say about sin from the Presbyterian perspective,

"Whether big and recognized or small and unrecognized, sin is part of every person's conscious and subconscious being, as well as one's actions, even the most loving and well-intended actions. The same is true for a group's efforts, be those groups church, gang, government, social, school, racial/ethnic, or civic."

They go on to quote theologian Daniel Migliore who summarized the "paradoxes" of sin that are present in Reformed theology,

1. Sin is both a "universal condition" and a "self-chosen act" for which individuals and groups are responsible;
2. Sin is part of all human action, both what's identified as evil and what's perceived as good;
3. Sin corrupts individual persons and corporate structures.

Now, you might rightly say, "Wow, if those Presbyterians have such a pessimistic view of the world, no wonder they have such sour looks on their face. No wonder they're called God's frozen chosen!"

HUMILITY AND HOPE

But, that's not all we say. We take the reality of sin very seriously as well we should ... but we do not take sin too seriously.

We say with John that sins can be confessed and forgiven. We say that though we are indeed unfaithful and blinded by our own sinful ways even in our attempts to do good, God can still use us for His glory and his kingdom. God can still take us by the hand and lead us in a new direction. God can lead us down the path He has prepared.

The key words in the process of repentance are humility and hope.
Are we humble enough to recognize the sin in our own lives and not treat others in a self-righteous way?

And do we have hope, hope that despite our sinful ways, the gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ can and will, on a daily basis, lead us in a different direction?

Just as John Grishom made the point in his book that it is not possible to skip Christmas, I would make the point that it is not possible to skip Advent either. All of us, each year and indeed every day need the Advent message of repentance and renewal.

We need to have a yearning in our heart for something better and a trust that God will prepare the way.

It is fitting that today we celebrate the Lord's Supper. For in that meal we are given a sign and seal of what we have learned today. The sin of the world led to the crucifixion. Body broken and blood shed were a result of a world which rejected (and still rejects) the very Son of God.

But, God did not allow sin to rule. He turned that which was the epitome of sin into the source of salvation and renewal.

So it is today. Repent and believe the good news of the gospel.
In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. In Him we can repent and find renewal.

Amen.