

“Repent!”

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¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“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. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
(Matthew 3:1-12)

This past summer I remember getting off the 7 train at Willet’s Point and heading down the long flight of stairs that descends to Citi Field. As the crowd neared the bottom of the staircase, it started to part, as if people were trying to avoid something. And they were. It was a strange but passionate man standing on a plastic crate holding a sign that read “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!” I have to confess that I took the cue and gave the man a wide berth. And I did so with full knowledge that, if Mets fans need to do anything, they need to be praying with every breath they have. We need to be invoking the power of heaven as fully as possible. But the honest truth is that very few of us enjoy being confronted with our sin and the consequences of our sin. Especially not on the way to a happy day at the ballpark. So I followed the crowd, moving quickly past the pointing finger of castigation and judgment.

I expect people did the same to John the Baptist. He was kind of a strange dude, too. He wore bizarre clothes and ate bugs. [I don’t know about you, but I would need a lot of honey to swallow a locust.] He didn’t have a typical job... didn’t have typical goals... didn’t do typical things. And his message to the world was just as inconvenient. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near... prepare the way of the Lord... the Holy One is coming soon... his winnowing fork is in his hand... so bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Calls to repentance are tough to hear. No one really enjoys confronting those parts of us that are broken, flawed, weak, rude, or selfish. But that honest moral inventory is a vital part of our preparation to greet the Messiah in the manger. As a pastoral colleague of mine once said, “You can’t get to Christmas without going through John.” What he meant was that the journey to blessed, light-bathed Bethlehem must always pass through the dark, dismal slum of Repentance. We may not like it, but that messy neighborhood is our own doing.



And confronting our sin to clear the way for Christ is just as much a part of Advent as decorating the tree, sipping eggnog, or baking cookies.

In fact, we cannot really get to the happy heart of Christmas if we do not do this tough work of repentance. And what is repentance exactly? In Old Testament Hebrew, repentance is a combination of two actions, two verbs: *shuv* means to turn around; and *nicham* means “to feel sorrow or regret.” In New Testament Greek, the verb form of the word *metanoia* means “to think differently after.”¹ The Bible is consistent on this: the call to repentance is a call to turn and face our imperfections, to feel the sorrow they have caused, and to have a genuine change of heart... to “think differently after.”

I heard a story one time about a man who received a strange gift. He had a November birthday, I remember that because I do, too. And an offbeat uncle thought he would enjoy having a parrot as a pet. That would have been fine, except the parrot had clearly been trained by very negative people. It could have been an actual pirate ship, because that parrot was rude and cussed like a sailor. Try as he might, the man tried to retrain the parrot, but it wasn't working.

Things really came to a head when the man hosted his family for Thanksgiving. The bird was actively rude to his family as they sat around the table. When the parrot cussed at the man's elderly grandmother, that was the final straw. He yelled at the bird to be quiet and put the cage in a back bedroom and closed the door. After the meal was over, the man felt a little bad and went back to retrieve the parrot.

When he did, the change was remarkable. “I clearly offended you,” the parrot said. “I regret my words and my actions, and I will try to do better from now on.”

The whole family was stunned. But before they could say anything, the parrot added, “And if you don't mind, may I ask what that turkey did?”

Now I ask, was that true repentance, or was it fear? Because there is a difference. Genuine repentance is not about self-preservation. It is not something we do just to avoid the “winnowing fork” or “unquenchable fire.” It is a response to a grace, a love, a mercy that is bigger than we deserve... bigger than we can imagine. In this season, as we prepare to greet that kind of love, we begin by taking an candid look at the ways we fall short of God's hopes for us. We **turn** to face them honestly. We allow ourselves to **feel sincere sorrow** and regret for them. And we commit ourselves to think and **act differently in the future**.

In today's world, true repentance is a counter-cultural act. As a society, we are losing the art of an apology. We do not take responsibility for our errors nearly enough. We do not say we are sorry nearly enough. We do not demand better of ourselves nearly enough. Whether we like it or not, our walk toward Christmas is a lot like that walk I took on the way into Citi Field. We may not enjoy being confronted with our sin and the consequences of our sin, especially on the way to a day in the sun, but we cannot get to Christmas without going through John.

So, this year, let the crowd go where they will. But as for us, let's keep our paths straight and walk right up to the man crying out to whoever will listen: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is drawing near.” **Amen.**

¹ “What Does It Mean To Repent?” <https://www.saintjohnchurch.org/what-does-it-mean-to-repent>, April 5, 2022.