



Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday in Advent

Date: December 10, 2006

Sermon Title: Repentance – New Direction

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

When I was a kid, I used to pick up the daily newspaper every day, and turn immediately to the comics page. One of my favorites was Dennis the Menace. I still remember one of those cartoons – Dennis is all alone, kneeling by his bed, with his hands folded and gazing up toward heaven. With an imploring look on face, he says, "O.K. God, I'm here to turn myself in."

Today is the second Sunday in the season of Advent – this four-week long time of preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ. Every year, the middle two Sundays in Advent have as their focus the preaching and the ministry of St. John the Baptist. John was a fiery preacher, who spent most of his time in the wilderness. With a camelhair robe and a leather belt, he lived off the land, and ministered with those who came out to see him.

As I understand his ministry, this is what would happen: people would come from miles around to hear him. He would challenge them to take a hard look at their lives, realize what they were doing that was contrary to God's word and will. They would feel remorse for their sinfulness – for how they had pushed God to the margins of their lives. They would decide it was time to make a change, and so John would walk them out into the river, thrust their heads under the water, and ceremoniously raise them up to new life. It was a dramatic ministry, and it led to dramatic changes in people's lives. Once John got hold of your heart, you were never quite the same.

St. Luke describes it in this morning's Gospel lesson. He writes that John's primary purpose was to prepare his listeners for the arrival of Jesus. That is an important distinction – one that each of the four Gospel writers goes to great lengths to make. John is described as a man of God: someone with a very powerful ministry. But John was not the Messiah. He was not the one for whom God's people had been waiting all that time. His role was different. Luke interprets it in terms of Isaiah's writings, and calls John the "voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" (verse 4 – see Isaiah 40:3) John's ministry had just one objective: to prepare people to receive the message that Jesus would bring.

And how did John do that? He was sent by God to: "proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (verse 3)

The question we've been considering this week is this: "What is repentance?" What is it that prepares a person to welcome Christ into heart and home? There are a number ways to answer that question:

- Repentance, as Dennis the Menace might try to teach us, is hitting our knees at the end of the day and turning ourselves in to God.
- Repentance is taking stock of our lives, and owning up to our shortcomings.
- Repentance is having remorse for the ways our sinfulness has had an impact on the lives of others (from the pain our sinfulness causes to those who are closest to us... to the damage our lifestyle does to the environment).
- In Christian terms, repentance is coming to the foot of the cross, in all of our brokenness, and seeking God's gifts of forgiveness and renewal.

But repentance doesn't stop there. When I was growing up, in the 60s and 70s, there was a significant level of mistrust between Christian religious groups, roughly

FIRST LESSON

MALACHI 3:1-4

OR

BARUCH 5:1-9

PSALM

ST. LUKE 1:68-79

SECOND LESSON

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 3:1-6

PRAYER OF THE DAY

STIR UP OUR HEARTS, O LORD, TO PREPARE THE WAY FOR YOUR ONLY SON. BY HIS COMING GIVE US STRENGTH IN OUR CONFLICTS AND SHED LIGHT ON OUR PATH THROUGH THE DARKNESS OF THIS WORLD; THROUGH YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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divided by some into Catholic and Protestant. Sadly, some of us who weren't Catholics doubted the sincerity of those who were. The popular misconception about Catholics in those days was that they used to go out every Saturday night and really tear up the town, because they knew they could show up at Mass on Sunday morning and be forgiven for whatever they had done.

I have since learned that many Catholics are far more sincere and far more faithful than that. I have also learned that repentance means far more than remembering your sins, mentioning them to God, and getting a free pass from having to take responsibility for what you've done.

I mentioned at worship last Wednesday night that the word itself gives us a clue as to what it is all about. Repentance is translated from the Greek word μετανοία (*metanoia*). Μετανοία means the transformation of a person's mind. It means discovering an entirely new way to view the world. It means to turn around and move in the exact opposite direction – to turn from sinful and selfish ways, and to begin living for God.

John's ministry was one of helping people discover their need for new direction in life. He would make it clear to them that if they continued in the direction they were going, they were headed towards disaster. He would convince them that they didn't want to go there. And he would help them to see another way – a healthier way – God's way – through life. That is how John would prepare his listeners for the arrival of the Christ.

He did that because he knew what Jesus wanted to accomplish among them. He knew that Jesus would come with an entirely new offer from God: the offer that for those who believed in the promise of Christ, God would grant them the gifts of forgiveness, renewal and eternity. John also knew that if the gift of Christ was going to touch their hearts, they first would have to understand their own need for forgiveness. They first would have to long for a new life. They first would have to glimpse what it would mean to live in a completely different way. His ministry with them, and his radical call to repentance, was an essential component in getting their hearts ready for Jesus to touch them. It was the basic building block upon which a life of faith would be built. If they didn't get repentance right, they would never be in a position to be transformed by the promise of Christ.

I've read that Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, used to begin his training camps each year by holding up a football and saying, "Boys, this is a football." Of course, everyone in the room knew what he was holding. They were professional football players. But they got the point. If they wanted to excel at playing professional football, then they first had to master the basics before moving on to more advanced things.

On December 31, 1967, Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers defeated the Dallas Cowboys for the NFL Championship and the right to play the Oakland Raiders in what would become known as "Super Bowl II." The Packers/Cowboys game is referred to as the "Ice Bowl" because it was 13-degrees below zero in Green Bay that day.

This was Lombardi's final year with the Packers and undoubtedly, the game was the crown jewel of his career. With 13 seconds to go in the game, Bart Starr ran a quarterback sneak from the 1-yard line to win the game.ⁱ Nobody knows for sure exactly what Vince Lombardi said to Bart Starr during the time out before he scored the winning touchdown, but it's a pretty safe bet that he didn't begin with, "This is a football." There is a time for basics and there is a time to focus in a more advanced way.ⁱⁱ

The same is true for the ministries of John and Jesus. John invited his listeners to the beginning point of Christian faith. He taught them how important repentance was: becoming aware of your sin, and desiring to move in a completely new direction. Jesus then provided the gifts of forgiveness and renewal and new life that would make it possible.

ⁱ see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NFL_Championship_Game,_1967

ⁱⁱ illustration from <http://www.leadnet.org/journey0104.asp>, <http://www.packers.com/gameday/1967/12-31>

In our Lutheran church, we have been focused on the power of God's grace for some five hundred years now. But grace without true repentance is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." The Christian message is not the call for an indiscriminate offer of forgiveness to the world. It begins with John, and the movement through repentance, and continues with Jesus, and the invitation into the fullness of God's grace. The essence of the Christian life is not a quick absolution that gets us off the hook for what we've done wrong. It is a deep journey of repentance that creates in us the awareness of our sin, and a desire for change. It opens us up to the power of the Gospel, and the possibility of being transformed by the presence of Christ in our lives.

This is what the season of Advent is all about. It is a time of considering the ways that Christ comes into our lives, and praying that his touch will transform us – and help us to become the people God needs us to be: a sign of God's loving and gracious presence in this world.

So where is it that God wants reform to take place in our lives today? How is it that our faith can transform us, and make a difference in the lives of those who surround us. That is the question of John the Baptists' ministry, and that is the question of Advent. May it be our question as well.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 10, 2006)

English Text: ⁱⁱⁱ

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" ^{iv}

Greek Text:

¹ Ἐν ἔτει δὲ πεντεκαιδεκάτῳ τῆς ἡγεμονίας Τιβερίου Καίσαρος, ἡγεμονεύοντος Ποντίου Πιλάτου τῆς Ἰουδαίας, καὶ τετραρχούντος τῆς Γαλιλαίας Ἡρώδου, Φιλίππου δὲ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ τετραρχούντος τῆς Ἰτουραίας καὶ Τραχωνίτιδος χώρας, καὶ Λυσανίου τῆς Ἀβιληνῆς τετραρχούντος, ² ἐπὶ ἀρχιερέως Ἄννα καὶ Καϊάφα, ἐγένετο ῥῆμα θεοῦ ἐπὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν Ζαχαρίου υἱὸν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ. ³ καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς πάσαν [τὴν] περιχώρον τοῦ Ἰορδάνου κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, ⁴ ὡς γέγραπται ἐν βίβλῳ λόγων Ἠσαίου τοῦ προφήτου· φωνῆ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ· ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ· ⁵ πάντα φάραγξ πληρωθήσεται καὶ πᾶν ὄρος καὶ βουνὸς ταπεινωθήσεται, καὶ ἔσται τὰ σκολιὰ εἰς εὐθείαν καὶ αἱ τραχεῖαι εἰς ὁδοὺς λείας· ⁶ καὶ ὄψεται πάντα σὰρξ τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ. ^v

ⁱⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

^{iv} St. Luke 3:1-6, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^v St. Luke 3:1-6, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.