

God brings us a new start, reconciliation and new life

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey

at The Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, December 4, 2016

The Second Sunday of Advent (year A), Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

*Matthew 3:1-12 (NRSV): In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This 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.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But 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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do 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. Even 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. "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. His 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."*

The roads were crowded this week, as I found myself among the hoards of people running errands. Preparations for Christmas are underway—decorations and presents and plans for family gatherings and time with friends. We are excited about the time we will have together at Christmas, so we take the time now to prepare.

Students are also in preparation mode at this time of year. The semester is coming to an end and exams are around the corner. Projects are getting completed, papers written, and notes prepared with focus for the end of the semester in hopes of what lies ahead.

As disciples of Jesus, we are in a season of preparation as well. Advent is a season of preparation. We remember the preparation and anticipation of Jesus coming into the world, and we prepare ourselves for his *second* coming. We also train ourselves in preparation for God's initiative into our lives today. God continues to reach out to us in our lives, and Advent is a time where we focus on preparing ourselves to receive him. Jesus brings us a new start, reconciliation, and a new life in him.

In all our Advent preparation, how do we prepare ourselves for the work of God in our lives? How do we prepare ourselves for Jesus?

When we prepare our homes for family gatherings, we clean house. We throw out the stuff that gets in the way, we dispose of the mess that has accumulated, and freshen our homes to receive our guests. We bring in light and new life in poinsettias and greens and signs that remind us of the occasion and the opportunity to renew our relationships.

When students prepare for the end of the semester, they also get rid of the clutter of their minds to focus on the new things they have learned. They prepare to put these lessons into practice in their exams, and in the new start of the next level of courses or the next steps in their lives.

Think of how Athletes train for competitions. Football quarterbacks and receivers drill their steps and timing, reinforcing their successes and eliminating mistakes to bring out their best. Think of how musicians prepare to sing or play—reviewing the music to root out the bad notes and to live more deeply into the phrasing and shape of the music, all for a beautiful outcome.

Disciples of Jesus Christ also prepare in similar ways. There are the regular practices of the Christian life—worshiping God together each week, praying each day, studying like dedicated students and focused athletes, serving Christ in the world. One of the ways in particular that we prepare in Advent is the Christian practice of repentance.

John the Baptist, in today’s Gospel reading, calls the people to “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near!” John baptizes as a sign of repentance. People came to John to confess their sins and be baptized, washing to become spiritually clean, renewing their commitment to God and preparing for the coming of the messiah. But what is repentance?

Repentance is more than confession. Confession is important and good for the soul. Confession is admitting what you did wrong. Confession is truth-telling. But repentance goes a step further. Repentance is turning away from what was done wrong and changing direction—doing what is right instead. Repentance is turning away from sin and toward God. So John tells the Pharisees who come to be Baptized “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” It is not enough only to make a sign of repentance; repentance should bear fruit in your lives.

Repentance is like cleaning house before the holidays. We clear out the clutter and mess to make room for our guests. Repentance is like the athletes and musicians who labor to replace mis-steps and wrong notes with the right steps and the right notes. This takes practice, of course. But with practice, we prepare for something beautiful. When we repent, we find those actions and words and attitudes in our lives that push God away or that damage our relationships or cultivate a sour soul in ourselves. We turn away from these habits of the soul and we embrace their opposite virtues. We embrace forgiveness and forbearance, patience, grace and mercy. With practice, and with God’s grace, we can bear the fruit of God’s grace for others.

I remember a time in my twenties when I was driving to my parent’s house for the holidays. As I drove home, I prepared myself for the inevitable family argument—I would work the angles and build a solid defense for myself in this imaginary discussion. By the time I arrived, when someone asked to pass the gravy, I was loaded for bear and ready to fight! My tension and anxiety got the better of me, and it affected the family and our Christmas as a result.

Anxiety and family tension has a way of spreading like the flu this time of year—it spreads through the family and into the workplace and church and neighborhood. I wonder if our

expectations of ourselves or of others is just a little too much at the holidays. And when there is so much going on, when we feel lots of pressure on ourselves, we tend to share that pressure with others. Or maybe the losses that we remember at this time of year make us more stressed and we forget to reach out for the support of others.

What if God's grace and forgiveness were just as contagious as this anxiety and tension? What if we prepared ourselves to forgive rather than attack or defend? Perhaps we might prepare to share such grace by opening ourselves to God's grace and mercy and forgiveness of us.

What if we did some house cleaning in our lives? What if we did some studying and training in our spiritual lives to live more in the grace of God? What might our repentance bring?

Advent preparation is not so much about self-improvement. Advent preparation has a direction and a goal. All the preparation and repentance and growth as disciples of Jesus has a goal. Our goal that we prepare for is what God brings us at Christmas. God brings us a new start, reconciliation and new life in Christ.

John the Baptist quotes the prophets as he calls the people to prepare the way of the Lord. Isaiah foretells the coming of the messiah and the peace and renewal that he will bring. He will bring "a spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." His promise is for peace beyond our imagination, and a world that will seek and know the Lord. Repentance is a way to open ourselves to the new start and new life that God has in store for us.

Paul writes to the Romans about their new life in Christ. He especially wants the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians to be reconciled to each other in Christ. He writes "may the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Advent preparation is not just about what we are doing in ourselves. It is about what God is doing in us. God sends his Holy Spirit to empower our repentance. God gives us a new start. As we prepare ourselves to bring God's grace to those family conflicts, God empowers us for reconciliation. It may not be perfect, but we have the chance to bring God's transforming power to our relationships.

As we prepare ourselves in mind and body and spirit to welcome our Lord, we take hold of God's gift of new life. The new start and reconciliation that God brings us is part of the new life that we can find in Jesus. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. This is what we prepare for in Advent.

Our practices of prayer and worship, study and service, and our Christian practice of repentance all serve to open us to the amazing work of God in our lives. Jesus brings us a new start, reconciliation, and a new life in him.