

Advent: Second Sunday

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Date: 08 December 2019

Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] Amen. Amen.

So, it's come to my attention that some of the children of our parish, particularly little Claire, have been singing, We Wish You a Penitent Advent.

Really entering into the spirit of the season, isn't she? That's amazing, isn't it? So, I have this feeling that John the Baptist would certainly think so.

Really perfect for getting into the spirit of Advent. Have this figure of John the Baptist. He's a real character, isn't he?

In our day and age, many of the preachers who end up drawing crowds do so primarily by telling people what they want to hear.

[1:32] Do so by saying things like, God wants you to have your best life now. But John the Baptist, he's drawing a crowd, and his message in this morning's passage is basically this.

You better repent or you're going to burn. Clearly struck a chord and made some waves.

Repentance stands at the very center of John the Baptist's message.

And it really stands at the very center of the message of Advent itself. If Jesus came and was born to save us, the proper response to that is one of repentance.

If Jesus is coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead and to establish his kingdom, the proper response to that is repentance.

You might be wondering at the moment what this has to do with the theme of stewardship that I mentioned would be a focus for our parish for Advent 2019.

[2:41] Well, repentance at its core is a stewardship issue. It comes down to the question of what we are going to do with our hearts.

What are you and I doing with what God has given us? Here's a question for us. What we're doing with our hearts is the thing that will determine what we're doing with everything else that God has given us.

The Anglican Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the Book of Common Prayer, believed this about the way that we act and the choices that we make. What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

Our hearts end up determining everything that we do. What we love ends up determining how we live. If we have penitent hearts that love Jesus, that's going to impact the entirety of our lives and the choices that we make.

But if we don't have penitent hearts that love Jesus, we could still find ourselves being very outwardly religious, but we're not going to live lives that truly glorify Christ.

[4:07] So repentance, that's a word that gets tossed around a lot in Christian circles and in the church. What is it? Well, it's to turn from our sin, right?

I've heard it said before that it's like when you make a wrong turn while you're driving and your GPS tells you to make a U-turn. J.I. Packer says that repentance is basically when we stop running from God as we are prone to do with sinful people and we turn around and go towards Him.

It's realizing that we have made a mess of things and that the only way forward that makes any sense at all is to turn around, to go home to our loving Father, to admit that we have messed up, trusting that He is going to welcome us home, forgive us, and clean the crud off of us.

It's important that we understand this because there is no true gospel without repentance. If we don't realize that we are sinners, we also don't realize that we need to confess our sins and we don't realize that we need the blood of Christ shed for us to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So if we don't understand that we need to repent, we don't understand the gospel. What happens when we repent?

[5:46] Like the way that Sinclair Ferguson talks about it, he says this, he says, it is misleading to say that God accepts us the way we are. Rather, He accepts us despite the way we are.

He receives us only in Christ and for Christ's sake, nor does He mean to leave us the way He found us, but to transform us into the likeness of His Son.

That, opposed to the attitude that, well, God accepts me just the way I am, and fortunately I'm doing pretty good, demonstrates what a penitent attitude looks like.

I think it's fair to say that the Pharisees and the Sadducees who came out to hear John the Baptist did not realize their need to repent of their sins and turn to Christ.

I think that's a fair assumption. So, John the Baptist is making waves with his preaching and his ministry, so the Pharisees and the Sadducees come to see what all the fuss is about.

[6:55] It's probably likely, I would have to think, that they would have expected a warm welcome from John the Baptist, because they were well-respected religious examples and guides and leaders of Israel.

Instead, what happens? John the Baptist is calling them a brood of vipers. They get rebuked. They get hit with a stern rebuke. Why? John is proclaiming repentance, and that is clearly not why they're on the scene.

He calls them a brood of vipers. He warns them to flee from the wrath to come. Apparently, John was basically saying to them, don't think for a second that your status as Israel's religious leaders, the position that you hold, is going to spare you from God's judgment.

What does he say? He says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. The message of repentance calls us to turn from our sins, to call on God for mercy, to desire the transformed heart that he alone can give.

[8:21] And even respected religious leaders are expected to do that. They don't get a pass. And then John deals with another potential barrier to repentance on their part.

He says in verse 9, do not presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

So the Pharisees and the Sadducees may have felt that their need to repent was diminished, not just because of their position as good, influential leaders, but also because of their ancestry.

They were great, great, great, great, great, great grandchildren of God's servant Abraham. I didn't do the math and actually count the generations, but you get the idea. And John is telling them, what, that they need to turn from their sin and start over?

Yeah, he was telling them exactly that. And John drives it home. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. A tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

[9:40] Well, that is an intense way for John to describe God's coming judgment, isn't it? John says, if Jesus' winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

tells us we, we and they, those who heard it originally, might want to heed John's message about the necessity of repentance.

But the really interesting thing to me, well, one of the really interesting things to me is that John the Baptist is delivering this message and this warning, not to notorious outcasts and sinners, right, but to the religious elite of Israel.

The people who are really religious and really respected. In the eyes of many, they would have been the right sort of people. And they are the ones that John is giving a firm warning.

What were they missing? Well, clearly they were missing the forgiveness of sin and the transformed heart that comes through faith in Jesus.

[11:13] There's a warning in John's message this morning that's implied in this example. Being really religious in and of itself isn't going to score us any points.

If repentance is walking towards God instead of running away from Him, then this kind of religion that John was criticizing actually does nothing but get in the way.

Religion that pumps up our pride and causes us to look down on our neighbors instead of trusting in Christ and loving our neighbors is religion without repentance.

Religion that causes us to magnify the sins of other people and then take a casual attitude towards our own sin is religion without repentance.

Or just shrugging and saying that we're all okay is also religion without repentance. And it doesn't help us.

[12:25] If we're thinking about stewardship throughout Advent 2019, we need to be careful not to start in the wrong place. Faithful stewardship is not ultimately about trying to modify our behavior.

It's not about trying to score points with God so that we can demonstrate to Him how awesome we are. It's not about trying to impress each other with how generous we are with our time or our abilities or our resources.

It's not even about trying to get the preacher to move on to talking about something else. No.

Faithful stewardship begins with the question of what we are going to do with our hearts.

Begins with this question. What is it that my heart loves? A penitent heart that is transformed by the Holy Spirit loves Jesus.

Love for Jesus affects the decisions that we make including, of course, the choices of what we do with what we've been given. A penitent, transformed heart bears generous fruit because it has been shaped by a generous God.

[13:56] On the other hand, if we find that our hearts are not in the right place, attempts to change our behavior approached at that level are just going to be exercises in futility.

The fallen human heart loves self far above anything else, even if it loves self sometimes in a self-destructive way. And that is our default setting, which is a really serious bummer.

So what do we do? We find that instead of penitent hearts, hearts that turn to God and His mercies in Jesus Christ, what do we find that instead of that, we have hearts that are still running from God? What do we do if we find that we have hearts that love self above all else and that this love of self is what drives all of the decisions that we make?

What do we do if we realize that we are indeed what we love and that the decisions that we've made in daily life don't paint a very positive picture of what we value and who we are?

[15:12] These questions aren't merely hypothetical, by the way. I'm speaking as a man who often takes an honest look at his own heart and does not like what he finds there.

But I think we find our answer in what John the Baptist says about Jesus. John says, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the one who is able to transform our hearts and he's the only one who can. So if we take an honest look at what is in our hearts and we don't like what we see, what should be our first response?

To repent and to ask Jesus to transform our hearts to make us more like him. Repentance is a topic that is often avoided by preachers, I think, because it's not an immediately uplifting thing.

[16:53] All of this talk about sin, turning from sin, confessing sin, that's a lot of sin. But ultimately, repentance is not a negative topic at all.

And we have to get used to it anyway because repentance is an ongoing feature of the life of the Christian. Why is it not the negative thing that we assume it might be at first glance?

Because at the end of the day, it's turning around, admitting that we messed up, seeing that we are still loved anyway, and going home to a father who loves us perfectly.

And that is a transforming thing because what we do with our hearts really matters.

What our hearts love is what our wills choose. And a heart that loves Jesus by his grace shines like a light in a darkened world.

[18:15] what we love drives what we do. What we love drives what we prioritize.

And so that being the case, a heart that belongs to Jesus and loves him is a beautiful thing that has an enormous impact.

too often we love things that we shouldn't.

Or we find that the first love in our hearts is something other than our Lord Jesus.

But the call to repentance that we see in the scriptures this morning is a blessed call for us to reorient and if we find that we need to to make a U-turn.

[19:29] Made a lot of U-turns in my day, both literal and figurative. But in all sincerity, I gladly wish you a penitent advent.

repentance! is a blessing. I can tell you from experience that it is a wonderful thing when we decide to give up our foolishness and go home.

And the penitent heart, the heart that knows what repentance is, knows just how precious Jesus really is.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.