

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2022

ADVENT 2

MATTHEW 3:1-12

ISAIAH 11:1-10

IS THERE ANY CHANCE WE CAN RECLAIM THE VALUE OF THE WORD REPENTANCE THIS ADVENT?

I ASK, BECAUSE I'M GUESSING MOST OF US ASSUME THAT REPENTANCE MEANS SAYING YOU'RE SORRY. OR BETTER YET, THAT YOU'RE REALLY, REALLY, SORRY AND WILL NEVER DO IT AGAIN – WHATEVER IT IS. AND SURE, THAT'S A PART OF REPENTANCE, BUT HONESTLY, IT'S A PRETTY SMALL PART.

THE HEART OF THE WORD REPENTANCE MEANS TURNING AROUND, STARTING OVER, TAKING ANOTHER DIRECTION, CHOOSING ANOTHER COURSE. ALL OF WHICH CALLS INTO QUESTION THE VALUE OF A RIGHTNESS OF YOUR CURRENT BEHAVIOR – THE EMPHASIS IS LESS ON WHAT IS WRONG WITH WHAT WE'RE DOING NOW, AND WHAT IS RIGHT AND IMPORTANT AND NECESSARY ABOUT WHAT WE WILL DO DIFFERENTLY.

REPENTANCE DOESN'T MEAN CHANGE FOR THE SAKE OF CHANGE, BUT RATHER THAT CHANGE IS NECESSARY BECAUSE WE'VE BECOME AWARE THAT OUR ACTIONS ARE OUT OF STEP WITH GOD'S DEEPEST DESIRE FOR PEACE FOR ALL OF HIS PEOPLE.

REPENTANCE IS REALIZING THAT GOD IS POINTING US ONE WAY, ALL THE WHILE WE'VE BEEN TRAVELING ANOTHER WAY, AND THEN CHANGING COURSE AS A RESULT OF THAT REALIZATION.

I REALIZE THAT ONCE WE LOOK AT REPENTANCE THAT WAY – IT CAN GET PRETTY DAUNTING RATHER QUICKLY. THERE ARE SO MANY THINGS WE COULD REPENT OF, AS INDIVIDUALS, AS A COMMUNITY, AS A NATION – WHICH MEANS IT'S NOT LONG BEFORE IT'S TEMPTING TO GIVE UP ON THE WHOLE REPENTANCE THING AND GO BACK TO BUSINESS AS USUAL.

MATTHEW FREQUENTLY QUOTES THE OT SCRIPTURES IN HIS GOSPEL, AND TODAY IS NO EXCEPTION. HIS READERS ARE EXPECTED TO, (AND DID) KNOW BOTH THE REFERENCES AND THE LARGER CONTEXT FROM WHICH THEY CAME.

ISAIAH 40:3 ENVISIONS A STRAIGHT ROAD UPON WHICH GOD RETURNS TO HIS PEOPLE WHO ARE RUNNING FROM CAPTIVITY IN BABYLON BACK ACROSS THE DESERT TO JUDAH.

EXODUS 23:20 PROMISES A MESSENGER WHO WILL GO BEFORE THE PEOPLE TO GUARD THEM ON THE WAY TO THE LAND GOD HAS PROMISED THEM.

MALACHI 3 BEGINS BY IDENTIFYING A MESSENGER WHO PREPARES THE WAY FOR THE LORD WHO WILL COME SUDDENLY TO HIS TEMPLE. ALL THREE REFERENCES PORTRAY THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISES TO THE PEOPLE, EITHER OF LAND OR OF RETURN TO LAND THAT HAS BEEN LOST.

AND TODAY'S TEXT CONFIRMS THAT GOD IS ONCE MORE COMING TO REDEEM HIS PEOPLE.

BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE – JOHN, AND THE JESUS HE ANNOUNCES, ARRIVE WITH THE MOST ASTONISHING COMBINATION OF ADMONITION AND ACCEPTANCE. NOT ONLY ARE WE RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT WE DO, BUT WE ARE CHERISHED FOR WHO WE ARE.

SEE, JOHN WAS A TRUTH TELLER – HIS JOB WAS SIMPLY TO SHOW PEOPLE HOW FAR FROM GOD THEY REALLY WERE.

TRUTH TELLERS ARE A RARE BREED TODAY, BECAUSE WE TEACH OUR CHILDREN AT AN EARLY AGE TO BE POLITE AND NOT HURT ANYONE'S FEELINGS. SO WE DON'T CONFRONT PEOPLE WHO OFFEND US – WE DON'T CALL PEOPLE ON THEIR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR.

OH SURE, WE MIGHT GOSSIP ABOUT THEM BEHIND THEIR BACK, BUT RARELY, IF EVER, SAY WHAT NEEDS TO BE SAID TO THEIR FACE.

JOHN THE BAPTIST, ON THE OTHER HAND, IS NOT ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE. HE SPOKE HONESTLY, EVEN WHEN THE TRUTH HURT. HE COULD BE HARSH, NOT ABOVE NAME CALLING TO GET HIS POINT ACROSS.

HE CALLED HIS AUDIENCE A BROOD OF VIPERS, BUT THEY JUST KEPT COMING BACK FOR MORE. FOR SOME, THE NAMING OF THE TRUTH CAME AS A RELIEF FROM THE BURDEN OF PRETENDING AND KEEPING SECRETS. THEY COULD FINALLY FACE THEIR LIVES, SEE A WAY FORWARD. BUT FOR OTHERS, JOHN WAS AN INTRUSION, AN ANNOYANCE, A PREACHER WHO NEEDED TO MIND HIS OWN BUSINESS.

“IF WE SAY WE HAVE NO SIN, WE DECEIVE OURSELVES, AND THE TRUTH IS NOT IN US,” JOHN THE GOSPEL WRITER WROTE. AND IT’S TRUE. YOU AND I HAVE AN AMAZING CAPACITY TO LIE TO OURSELVES. WE NEED JOHN TO TELL US THAT WE ARE SINNERS WHO WILL PUT OUR TRUST IN JUST ABOUT ANYTHING OTHER THAN GOD IN ORDER TO FIND SECURITY AND HAPPINESS.

WHICH MAKES US DISOBEDIENT AT THE VERY LEAST, BUT ALSO MISERABLE, BECAUSE IT JUST DOESN’T WORK.

SEE, SIN IS MORE THAN JUST DOING BAD THINGS OR THINKING WRONG THOUGHTS – IT’S OUR TENDENCY TO MISTRUST GOD AT EVERY TURN; IT IS OUR PATTERN OF TURNING AWAY FROM HIM TO DO OUR OWN THING. BECAUSE UNTIL WE FACE IT, NOTHING CAN BE DONE TO CHANGE IT.

WHICH IS JOHN’S POINT, OF COURSE. JOHN SHOWS US THE WAY WHEN HE SAYS “REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR.” THERE’S THAT WORD WE TALKED ABOUT EARLIER – TO TURN AROUND AND GO IN A NEW AND DIFFERENT DIRECTION.

IT’S BEEN 400 YEARS SINCE ANYONE HEARD A WORD FROM THE KING OR RECEIVED A MESSAGE FROM HIS REPRESENTATIVES. JOHN COMES TO SAY HE’S COMING BACK AT LAST. BUT HOW?

TO GET TO ANY CITY OR TOWN WHERE JOHN PREACHED, YOU HAD TO GO THROUGH THE DESERT. IN MOST CASES THERE WAS NO ROAD. SO, WHEN YOU GOT WORD THAT THE KING WAS COMING, YOU HAD TO BUILD ONE – AND FAST. SO OFF GOES THE HERALD, SCREAMING AT PEOPLE TO GET BUSY.

THE MESSAGE HAD ECHOED THROUGH THE JEWISH PEOPLE FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS BY THE TIME OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, EVER SINCE IT WAS FIRST SPOKEN BY THE PROPHET ISAIAH.

GOD WOULD COME TO COMFORT, HEAL AND RESCUE HIS PEOPLE WHO HAD LIVED UNDER OPPRESSION FOR SO LONG.

THE PROPHETS HAD SAID THAT GOD WOULD COME BACK WHEN THE PEOPLE REPENTED, TURNING TO HIM WITH ALL THEIR HEARTS. AND THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT JOHN PRODDED

THEM TO DO, AND THEY CAME IN DROVES. THEY CAME FOR BAPTISM. OVER A THOUSAND YEARS BEFORE, THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL HAD CROSSED THE JORDAN RIVER WHEN THEY FIRST ENTERED AND CONQUERED THE PROMISED LAND.

NOW THEY HAD TO GO THROUGH THE RIVER AGAIN AS A SIGN THAT THEY WERE GETTING READY FOR A GREATER CONQUEST – GOD’S DEFEAT OF ALL EVIL AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF HIS KINGDOM ON EARTH.

JOHN SPOKE OF A BLAZING FIRE THAT WOULD PURIFY AND AN AXE LAID AT THE ROOT OF THE TREE.

WHEN THE KING COMES, HE WILL BRING JUDGEMENT AS WELL AS MERCY. REPENTANCE MEANS GETTING RID OF ANYTHING THAT STANDS IN THE WAY OF ALLOWING GOD ACCESS TO YOUR LIFE. IN THE CASE OF THE PHARISEES AND THE SADDUCEES, IT WAS PRIDE AND ARROGANCE.

WHAT IS IT FOR US? WHAT IS IT IN YOUR LIFE & MINE THAT IS BLOCKING GOD’S BLESSINGS?

THE TRUTH REALLY WILL SET YOU FREE.

SO WHAT IS IT THAT STANDS BETWEEN YOU AND FORGIVENESS? BETWEEN YOU AND HEALING? BETWEEN YOU AND PEACE?

WHATEVER IT IS, JOHN WOULD SAY,
BULLDOZE IT.
DROWN IT.
BURN IT.
CHOP IT DOWN.

DO WHATEVER YOU HAVE TO DO IN ORDER FOR THE LORD TO HAVE FULL ACCESS TO YOUR HEART, MIND, AND WILL.

JOHN’S WORDS SEEM JARRING AND OUT OF PLACE TO US AS WE LOOK FORWARD TO CHRISTMAS.

BUT THEY ARE MEANT TO GIVE US HOPE. AND THEY ARE TRUE.
WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE IF ALL OF US CLEARED A PATH FOR GOD THIS WEEK?

WHAT COULD HAPPEN IN OUR CHURCH, IN OUR CITY, IF, LIKE JOHN, WE ALL BECAME
HERALDS OF TRUTH AND HOPE?

IN JESUS' NAME. AMEN.