

Repenting Sincerely
Second in a Series of Four Sermons: “Getting Christmas Right”
Second Sunday in Advent, December 3 and 4, 2022,

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our sermon series theme on these four Sundays in Advent is “*Getting Christmas Right.*” Next Sunday our theme is *Rejoicing Always*. The Sunday after that: *Magnifying Christ*. Last Sunday, we focused on *Staying Awake*, spiritually speaking. Three lessons we learned about *getting Christmas right* included 1) good posture, 2) correct expectations, and 3) a sense of urgency about receiving those gifts of comfort and joy God is so eager to give.

All three lessons chosen for today speak to us about sincere repentance. Scriptures teach that repentance consists of two parts - contrition and faith. Contrition is effected by God’s Law, and faith is worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. The Law tells us what not to do and what to do, and the Gospel tells us what God has done for us in the Person and Ministry of Christ. The Law shows us our sin and the Gospel shows us our Savior. The Law reminds us that we’re going in the wrong direction, and the Gospel is that sweet and good news that is able to turn us around and light up our pathways moving forward.

Three parts to our sermon today. The first shows us how repentance begins. The second shows us where it leads. And the third shows us what it looks, sounds, and feels like in real life.

• *Sincere repentance begins with being thoroughly disgusted with the way things are*

It happened in the old Wild West. A man with a long criminal record was caught stealing a horse. In those days, stealing a horse was severely frowned upon. If found guilty, horse thieves could be hanged. This particular thief did what Americans often do. He hired himself the fanciest lawyer he could find. And sure enough, when the lawyer had done all he could do, the verdict came back - not guilty. Case dismissed. He was free to go.

Now you would think the horse thief would get out of Dodge as quietly and quickly as possible, but he didn’t. He had the nerve to ask the judge this one question, “Your honor, does this mean I get to keep the horse?” That’s messed up. Right?

There's plenty that is messed up in our society, as well. The other night Debi and I tuned into the local news out of Tampa. The first four stories had to do with homicides and shootings, including one story of a man using a hatchet assault a 56 year old friend who had taken him in. That's messed up. A couple of days ago, I read a report coming out of England that a Professor Michael Banner from Trinity College agreed with a student preacher from Cambridge that Jesus may well have been a transgender male. That's messed up. The list goes on and on of society increasingly calling evil good and good evil.

We are submerged in a culture swarming with false teaching and lies of all kinds - some subtle and others bald face. Traditional values, one right after another, are getting torpedoed by a mentality that is all about eating, drinking, and being merry here and now. Some days we may feel as though we are drowning in it, that we can trust nothing that we hear, that we are headed for disaster. Which is exactly where sincere repentance begins - with a recognition that we're in the wrong place, we're headed in the wrong direction, it's time for a U-turn, or as my smart phone would say, recalculating.

This morning we want to focus not so much on the direction of society, but on ourselves. Getting Christmas right begins by you and I being thoroughly disgusted with one or more of our own bad habits. Perhaps it is a "drinking too much" problem, or a "eating too much" problem or a "laziness" problem, or a "workaholic" problem or a "needing to have everything just right" problem. Perhaps it is a "spending too much money" problem or a "poor stewardship of time" problem, or you fill in the blank.

Eugene Peterson, in his book "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction", suggests that repentance isn't an emotion, that it's not just a matter of feeling sorry for your sins. "It is a decision. It is deciding that you have been wrong in supposing that you could manage your own life and be your own god; it is deciding that you were wrong in thinking that you had, or could get, the strength, education and training to make it on your own; it is deciding that you have been told a pack of lies about yourself and your neighbors and your world. And it is deciding that God in Jesus Christ is telling you the truth."

In today's Gospel lesson, John the Baptist is that voice in the wilderness crying out for sinners to repent, in light of the fact that the kingdom of God is at hand. He compares repentance to building a straight road. As soon as I wrote that sentence, I wondered how much it costs to build a road. And so I looked it up. If you're

looking for a four lane highway in rural or suburban areas, it's 4-6 million per mile. Four lanes in the city will cost you between 8 and ten million. 6 lanes in the city will cost 11 million per mile. And if you're looking for new construction divided rural 6 lane interstate with ten feet paved shoulders inside and out, one source tabulates it as \$7.5 million dollars per mile

Daily repentance isn't an easy thing. Scriptures compare it to drowning the old adam and crucifying the flesh. Jesus taught that although salvation is free, discipleship is costly. It means being intentional about denying yourself, picking up your assigned crosses, and following your Savior as closely as possible.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who are motivated to get Christmas right this year. They know that before a person can do good things for God, there must be bad things he will not do. They realize that what God wants from them is not going to be achieved by doing the same old things and thinking the same old thoughts. Again and again they bring their regrets and their confessions before God in heaven above. Again and again, they shake their heads in dismay at all of their good intentions which have gone awry, at all of the times they should have known better, at all of the opportunities to do good they have missed. One more time, they cry out to God for forgiveness. One more time, God smiles, all of heaven rejoices, their sins are sent away as far as the east is from the west.

•Sincere repentance leads us directly to Christ

II Corinthians 7:9, yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. 10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

A bad mistake we could make here today is to be disgusted with the behavior of others instead of our own. We do well to remember that both John and Jesus reserved their toughest language for the religious leaders of that day. It was the Pharisees and not the lepers that were labeled a brood of vipers. It was the church council and not the gluttons and drunkards and prostitutes and tax collectors that Christ named as whitewashed sepulchers. Along with St. Paul, we do well to think of ourselves not as better than average, but instead as chief of sinners.

Perhaps a worse mistake would be to be sorry for our bad habits but not sorry enough to do anything about it. To be sorry in the way the horse thief was sorry - sorry that he got caught. Repentance is about each of us in every of our days drowning the old sinful adam with all of its prejudices and bad attitudes so that the new life in Christ might rise up and be alive. It is about seeing the damage I have done with my wrong behaviors, seeing the damage I have done with my puffed up perspective, seeing the damage I have done by not listening well to loved ones, seeing the damage I have done with my know it all attitude, seeing the damage I have done with my bad habits.

All of that damage done, all of those regrets, all of those good intentions that have fizzled out, all of those mistakes made we would bring in this season to Bethlehem. Here at the manger we see exactly how deep and how wide is the love of Jesus for us - that He would give up the riches of heaven to become for us a fertilized egg, an embryo growing inside of a mere mortal, a fetus dependent on a frightened teenager, a newborn wrapped up and cared for in surroundings best suited for animals.

We see the love of Jesus for us through the prophet Malachi who pictures Christ as the refiner's fire and a launderer's soap. Malachi asks the question, "Who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears?" Or to ask it another way, "Who can take this in? Who can comprehend what is going to happen - this process that must be completed before God's children stand pure and holy before his throne to begin the eternal celebrations?"

The love of Jesus is pictured as a refiner putting gold through the fire so as to make the gold. Or as a launderer who cleans by rubbing and kneading and beating it to make the cloth soft and clean and pliable. John the Baptist pictures Jesus as baptizing the Church with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

As we try in the year 2022 to *get Christmas right*, we are reminded that the Lord desires a pure product. You shall be holy because the Lord your God is holy. To be repenting in sincere fashion is to have that heart that desires to be scrubbed and scoured clean by the blood of Jesus. It is that heart that wishes to put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, we might be able to stand our ground.

To say it in ten words or less - *Getting Christmas right is about growing in Christian faith*. Sincere repentance isn't so much about the quantity of our sorrow, it's the direction in which it takes us. Worldly sorrow leads to a place

worse than nowhere - it leads to spiritual death. But Godly sorrow leads us directly to the Word of Christ and the Sacraments of Christ, where we are in a position for the Holy Spirit to work inside us a faith that is alive and well. Faith is the hand that receives and enjoys the gift of salvation our God is wanting us to have. In this sanctuary, we define faith not as a decision we make to be trusting in our Savior, but rather a gift that is worked inside of us by the Spirit of God as we hear the Word of God and treasure it. A faith that matures as we bring our flaws and failures again and again to the foot of our Savior's cross, where His blood cleanses us from every last one of our sins. A faith that is strengthened and solidified and purified at our Lord's Supper as we taste the goodness of our God. A faith that especially grows as we endure all kinds of troubles with God's help, and as

•Sincere repentance answers the question, “What then shall we do?”

Paul writes to the Corinthians, See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

I've said it before and I'll say it again. We are saved by faith alone in Jesus Christ, but faith never comes alone. It always comes with a desire to do the good works prepared by God for us to do before we were ever born. John the Baptist declares it this way, ***“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.”***

Paul talked about this new attitude present in the Corinthian congregation as an eagerness to clear up what was wrong in their life together, an indignation about that which was dividing them, a longing and a readiness to see justice done.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers determined to bear much fruit in this season and beyond. On their below average days, they lose sight of the big picture and stumble back into a same old same old mentality. On their decent days, they find a quiet place and spend time hearing and believing and praying through the familiar Christmas stories. On their best days, they apologize to God and to one another, and they do so sincerely. They go running to the lover of their souls. They receive, revel in, and enjoy the generosity of their gracious God. And more than that, they go looking for opportunities for that generosity to spill over into the lives of others. In Jesus' Name. Amen.