

# *“Repentance Can’t Wait”*

*Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12*

*Part II of VI in the sermon series “What Can’t Wait”*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 8, 2019, Advent 2, dedicated to the memory of Jim Fewlass, to the children, parents and teachers of First Church, to the spirit of love and light they all bring to this Advent/Christmas season, to Tom Worley and Steve Brandehoff as they recover from surgery and to my colleague and friend the Rev. Jay Groat, Sr. Pastor, Westerville UCC on this important day of his life and always to the glory of God!

***“Repentance Can’t Wait”***

***Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12***

We have arrived at the second Sunday of Advent. Christmas Day is 17 days away. Let us breathe deep and remember – this is a season of anticipation, yearning and longing for a different kind of life and a different kind of world. Let us never reduce it to a penitential season (like Lent) in which we prepare for the second coming of Jesus, or as some would have us do – “remembering that Jesus was born so that he could pay for our sins.”

Instead, let us explore together the prophet John the Baptist and the prophet Isaiah's words of repentance – which does NOT mean an apology. The biblical meaning of “repentance” is quite different from an apology. It means so much more. Let's turn to the text and turn toward God....

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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Every Advent, we must pass by John to get to Jesus. We start out innocently walking through this season following a star to Bethlehem's stable and right around the second Sunday of Advent we meet a prophet of God is carrying on about our sins, our need for repentance and a “brood of vipers” (previously called followers of God) who are playing around with their interest in God's salvation.

We know John is playing the role of prophet in this story because he is dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt, the exact same outfit Elijah wore 800 years before him. (Remember Elijah – the prophet who disappeared into heaven in a chariot of fire never to be seen again? The prophet who has an empty seat at

the table every Passover as people await his return? Yeah that prophet!)

John's hair and beard are never trimmed. John is skinny like a cactus and prickly, too. He looks like a caveman but we meet him carrying on about people's sins and God's forgiveness and knee deep in the Jordan River dunking people for a baptism of repentance of sins.

Every Advent, John the Baptist is the last person in the world most of us want to see. He seriously disrupts our perfect view of Christmas with snow all around and the ever improving and always beautiful State Auto nativity scene of the baby Jesus with peace on earth. As pretty as it is, John Baptist is nowhere to be found at State Auto's nativity.

Some of us in this room have gone to great lengths to avoid John's language and voracity - leaving the churches of our childhoods, running away from (Baptist) preachers, looking the other way when we see signs on the highway that say, "*Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand. Confess your sins or go to...*" "**Cincinnati?**" (you know the sign I'm talk about heading south on US 71 – it's REAL!).

John's message is not one most of us run to hear. Rather, most of us run in the exact opposite direction. Through the years, many of us have felt shamed, scolded, punished, threatened, frozen

(too) by or just plain frightened by John's REAL hell, fire and damnation variety of Christianity. We had eager and judgmental preachers delivering this message with what appeared to be real fire coming from their breath.

In recent years, we've seen John's message dressed up and made pretty with rock bands, ultra-screens, clips from movies that seemingly tell the Bible's story better than we could ever do, skits, praise music and other more palpable ways of presenting judgment. We get sucked into judgment and manipulated in to feeling bad about ourselves as we get sucker punched by judgmental preachers and churches – all delivered with a smile.

But in the end, we still find ourselves moving to the exits when “heaven” is presented as one dimensional, according to that particular church's views, and “hell” is where we could go and others do go who don't buy what is being sold as a narrowly defined, one dimensional version of Christian faith. We choose not to receive as “Good News” the Gospel according to John the Baptist because we feel it is a Gospel according to judgment. Instead, we focus on the Good News of love found in Christ.

But no matter how we run or walk away, dance around it, or, like W.C. Fields, “hedge our bets,” there is no getting around or away from John the Baptist. He is here every single Advent. He is not going away. Like the troll on the bridge to Bethlehem, we

must pass his way or miss Christmas altogether. So, let's listen to what he is ACTUALLY saying, and reframe our response to John.

John is God's appointed messenger. He was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. His message is clear. The one whom he foretells is not coming to host a "tea party." Rather, he is coming to chop down the dead wood, separate the wheat from the chaff, cut a path through the wilderness and separate fruit-bearing trees (and people) from those who give nothing and do nothing for others around them.

John tells us, the one who is coming will judge the world. He is coming to determine who is on the side of life and who is not; who is about the work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, educating the children and caring for widows, orphans and refugees and bringing justice to all, and who is not. If you don't believe this part read Matthew 25:31-46.

Even though we may want to run away from John, we find it amazing that people walked through treacherous, mountainous deserts for 20 miles and more to see him and receive his baptism of repentance in the waters of the Jordan River. Or is it really so amazing?

Consider the Jewish Bible's definition of repentance. It is simple and it is clear. The biblical meaning of "repentance" is quite different from an apology. In the Jewish Bible, the Christian Old Testament, **"repentance" means "to return"** – that is, to return from exile, to return to life in the presence of God, to return to a life centered in God.

**In order to return, you have to turn around.** When you leave something back at your house that you forgot, you turn around. (Susan and I do it all the time. She asks, "did you close the garage?" I say, "I'm not sure." She says, "let's go back and check." So, we turn around.) It is simple. It is clear. When you forget the names of God, the ways of prayer, the place of family and friends, the way of life, the way of love, you turn around and head back – coming out of the wilderness of your own creating and coming back to the fullness of life.

In the Christian New Testament, the word "repentance" carries this meaning of "return" and one more meaning. **The roots of the Greek word for "repentance" mean "to go beyond the mind that you have."** You have to literally – reintegrate your mind and spirit. You need to rediscover and reclaim the mind you have lost, the way you have lost, the purpose you have lost, all that you have lost – in order to find your way forward.

So, you can see, apology and repentance, forgiveness and repentance, are quite different. Apology and forgiveness do not in themselves imply change. However, Repentance is clearly all about change. It about changing your ways, changing your words, changing your behaviors, maybe changing the people you hang with, changing directions, changing paths you take and changing your mind – Repentance is all about Changing!

Can you see where John was really headed here?

After all, we know quite well, as did the people of old, that John was no self-appointed street preacher who set himself on the corner of Broad and High or the Oval at OSU. He was God's chosen prophet - named by the Angel Gabriel and given to Elizabeth and Zechariah for this very purpose. And we know there is a huge difference between self-appointed prophets and the "real deal."

John is a "real deal" prophet of God who points beyond himself to *"the one who is more powerful than I."* John said it this way: *"The one who is more powerful than I am coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. . . His will be an unquenchable fire."* (Matthew 3:11-12)

In other words, the Messiah is MORE fiery, more Spirit-led, and more powerful than the one people are flocking to see and hear

and get soaked by in the streams of living water flowing through the desert! Wow! Talk about a powerful image of Jesus - the one who baptizes with the Spirit and unquenchable fire!

John's words serve as an axe that cuts the listener to the stump. His words bring us down to earth. They level the playing field by cutting clean and clear.

Every one of us gets stumped by John the Baptist – unless we are perfect already.

Not one of us likes to be stumped by anybody – not a prophet of God or anyone else for that matter. But God's truth spoken in love has a way of cutting us loose from our roots. Just ask another prophet – Isaiah. He knows what being stumped is all about.

### **Have you ever been stumped in your life?**

Have you felt your energy drained, your spirit decimated, your hopes and dreams cut off? Another way of phrasing it might be - have you hit rock bottom and found that you can't get any lower than this? Have you found yourself in an emotional, spiritual or economic hole where you keep blaming everyone and everything around you for all that going wrong? If so, you have been stumped. Facing yourself and the truth of your own reality is a real spiritual stumper!

Once stumped, we find ourselves leveled and waiting for that which will bring us hope. We are waiting for the sprig of new life to rise from our stump. But given time, perhaps a season or more of stillness stuck in our stumped reality, we start to listen. We listen to God. We listen to those who love us. We listen because we have been leveled to the ground.

From the prophet Isaiah we hear: *“A green shoot will sprout from Jesse’s stump, from his roots a budding branch. The life-giving Spirit of God will hover over him, the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding”* (The Message, Isaiah 11:12).

### **Out of the stump, hope rises.**

When we are clean, cutoff, at last we discover our need for God. Down close to the earth, **we are humbled** - remember the root word “humus” comes from the rich, dark stuff of the earth.

When we are stumped, we know we need God’s mercy more than judgment. Down at ground level, we see what really matters. We discover there is more mercy in our God than there is sin in us. We see that love is stronger than death. We come to know that forgiveness is stronger than sin. We come to know that God meets us in mercy. In mercy, God receives us. We come to know God’s love is greater than everything else. In love, God receives us.

So, return to God all of you who have been stumped. Return to God all who have been humbled. Return to God and prepare to be changed by the fire and power of God's Holy Spirit! Come and receive God's forgiveness. Come and receive God's mercy. Come and receive God's love. Come and receive God's grace.

All earth is hopeful this second Sunday of Advent. We cannot get around John and his message. We have to cross the bridge with the Prophetic Troll to get to Bethlehem's stable. So, let us come to him and go through him and be washed by clean by the spirit of wisdom and understanding he gives to us as we make our way to Christmas. It is the only way to get all the way to the newborn baby. Amen.