

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 13, 2009, dedicated to the memory of Barbara Mitcheltree Heer, who entered eternal life on Monday, December 7, and always to the glory of God!

“ . . . Move Forward ”

***Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6;
Luke 3:7-18***

***Part II of V in the Advent/Christmas
sermon series***

“For Such a Time As This . . . ”

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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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“We live now, in the United States, in a culture so profoundly pagan that Advent is no longer noticed, much less observed. The commercial acceleration of seasons, whereby the promotion of Christmas begins even before the opportunity to enjoy Halloween, is superficially, a reason for the vanishment of Advent. But a more significant cause is that churches have become so utterly secularized that they no longer remember the topic of Advent.”

So wrote William Stringfellow in 1994 – 15 years ago (found as an essay in *Keeper of the Word*, edited by Bill Wylie Kellerman).

This “acceleration of seasons” and “vanishment of Advent” has

only grown since 1994. This year alone, \$450 billion will be spent for Christmas. All too many of us in this room, unashamedly and unquestioning, will spend more in six weeks of Christmas shopping than we will pledge to the church for the entire coming year. In fact, I believe if we checked receipts at our deacons' "Customer Service Desk" in the main office, we would find that our spending at least triples the intentions of this congregation for 2010 to support the mission and ministry of the church. Echoing John the Baptist's words, it is not too late to turn this around!

While I would love to spend the entire sermon analyzing this spending trend upward for Christmas and downward for investing in our life together, allow me to return to the primary question raised by William Stringfellow, "*Where has Advent gone?*" What have we done with the penitential season given to us through the prophets' writings in Malachi, Jeremiah, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah and our own prophet from the New Testament, John the Baptist?

Let's start with John.

John the Baptist returns this week to call us once again to move forward toward the Christ. Building upon last week's gospel, Luke 3:1-6, today's gospel, 3:7-18, could not be clearer. Crowds of people in John's time appear in the desert like Christmas shoppers flocking for the best deals at Wilderness Walmart. They travel great distances out of the cities and into the desert to buy what John is selling – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

However, unlike Walmart greeters who smile and push a huge shopping cart in our general direction, John explodes and screams at the people, "You brood of snakes! What do you think you are doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin." (Luke 3:7ff, in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*). Now, I don't know about you, but I have yet to receive a Christmas card with any of these words on it. What would

you write afterwards, “Happy Advent, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, Love, The Boa Constrictors?”

For the third Advent Sunday in a row, we are being called to repentance. Hello Walmart shoppers, is anyone paying attention? And what is repentance anyway?

Random House’s Unabridged Dictionary defines “repentance” as “deep sorrow, compunction or contrition for a past sin, wrongdoing or the like; to regret any past action.” Repentance comes from the Latin-rooted *paenitere*, which is translated “repent” and means to “regret, or to feel truly sorry, self-reproachful, or contrite for past conduct.” Random House tells us that to repent means “to feel such sorrow for sin or fault as to be disposed to change one’s life for the better.” Remember, this is Random House, not John the Baptist.

As individuals, we repent when we have knowingly betrayed another person, lied about them, hurt them through our actions or inactions. Clearly, to repent means to have an inner-awareness of breaking a relationship. Sometimes we know all too well that we have failed another child of God in this world. We have trouble looking in the mirror knowing we have hurt them.

Sometimes we continue blissfully unaware until they come to us and tell us how they are feeling. At that point, the burden of repentance is laid upon us. Some of us get angry or defensive at such a time as this. But we are called to be prayerful, and hopefully, to confess our misdeeds or misspoken words so that they might receive our deep regret and apologies. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that when we repent, we become repairers of the breach, restorers of the house to live in,

But John (and I, and hopefully you, too) is not only concerned about confession of sins against one another. He is deeply concerned about injustices related the whole creation of God. He says, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” John is

warning the emperors, kings, and common people that Christ is coming. If we are going to “get real,” we better “get real” real fast.

This is not a fictionalized account called “2012” from Mayan mountain calendars. No astrologers, hucksters or quacks can preempt the second arrival of Christ. Like it or not, all of creation will be accountable for their deeds or misdeeds. That certainly includes us!

Recognizing their guilt and need for turning their lives around, all the crowds of “Baptism Shoppers” scream, “What should we do?”

So John breaks it down. He says to the whole group, “Share your food and clothing.” The tax collectors (who apparently were checking the IRS code on shared food and clothing and missed the answer) repeat the same question. For the tax collectors, John expands the answer and tells them to stop gouging the poor through beating them down with high interest rates on Roman taxes. This would be our equivalent of Pay Day Lenders. John shouts at them, “No more extortion! Collect only what’s required by law.”

The soldiers come next. They were told what they should do. John says, “No more shakedowns, road side stops, blackmail. Be content with your rations.” For John, justice, compassion, honesty, and integrity take the place of their opposites. This is the good news which comes out of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is what a “turned around” life looks like. It is a life of justice, compassion, honesty and integrity!

Upon hearing all this, the Baptism Shoppers declare that John must be the Messiah. But John is clear that he is not the Messiah. In Eugene Peterson’s version of Luke, John says:

“The main character is this drama, to whom I am a mere stagehand, will ignite kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from inside out. He is going to clean house - make a

clean sweep of your lives. He will put everything true, in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned." (Luke 3:15-17).

You get the point! The Advent, or "the coming of God," is loaded with opportunities to turn your life around – change from inside out, clean your house, put everything in its proper perspective – MOVE FORWARD!

If you hoard your worldly goods, you need to share them. I am sure most of us have enough coats to wear and food to eat. We need to share what we have. If we are taking advantage of the poor in any way, we need to turn our lives from oppression-bearers to become justice-bearers.

Instead of shouting with the unrepentant Scrooge, "Are there no poor houses? Are there no prisons?," God calls us, through the prophets, to be like the repentant Scrooge of whom it was said by Charles Dickens at the end of *A Christmas Carol*:

"Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew . . . Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh and little heeded them, for he was wise enough to know that little happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter at the outset . . . and it was always said of Scrooge that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.

What joy there is in the repentant Ebenezer Scrooge! We can take our turn on the stage of life by following his example.

Just a final thought about repentance. Many of us would rather not talk about repentance. I find this particularly true in the United Church of Christ. We don't like it because it doesn't make us "feel good." But I believe nothing makes us feel better than "true repentance." I believe when we are sensitive to the pain we cause

others in thought, word and deed and when we choose to make amends by healing the rifts, we create peace where there was no peace, we bring justice to an unjust world, and we feel better than ever before.

This is true in our individual lives. But in addition to our individual lives, we are all part of systems that are hurt or unreconciled – family systems, church systems, school systems, work systems. When the systems of which we are a part are unreconciled, so are we. When they are broken, they hurt us and future generations. Healing the past and dealing with the present allows us to find a joy that will guide our future in Christ. The prophet Hosea says, “The way out of our pain is to go back through it.” We will move forward once we have gone back through what ails us.

When we follow the prophet Hosea’s words, then the prophets Isaiah and Zephaniah’s words make sense. They call to us today about the joy of faith. It is joy that grows out of repentance and turning our lives and the life of injustice around. This joy is not found throughout his prophecy as Zephaniah has ranted and raged about people’s faithlessness and injustice. But he comes to end of his prophecy and sets the record straight.

Some say that he didn’t even write these words because they seem so out of place. But I believe in the last words of the Old Testament, Zephaniah points forward to Christ when he says, “You have carried your burdens long enough . . . I will bring you back home – a great family gathering! . . . You’ll see with your own eyes – all those painful partings turned into reunions! God’s Promise will prevail!” (Paraphrased from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, p. 1724).

Then the prophets are silent for 600 years until John cries out in the wilderness about the coming of Christ.

You see, true happiness and joy do not come out of a

cushioned life that never struggles, bears hardship or faces sacrifice. A heart of true joy is never found in luxuriously coddled lives, but in men and women who achieve and dare despite the sickness, pain and struggles of their lives. True joy comes from the struggle of the soul. It grows out of exile and poverty of the heart.

Last night on the *CBS Evening News*, there was a story about one of the world's greatest surfers, Darryl "The Flea" Virostko. "The Flea" has conquered the greatest waves in the world. Fifty-foot walls of water rolling toward rocky beaches in California and Hawaii never scared him. He rode them all!

But, by his own confession, he did it stoned on acid and drunk on vodka. Not long ago, he was so drunk he fell off a cliff and literally hit bottom. He got himself into rehabilitation. In his recovery, Darryl decided to help other addicts recover through surfing. He called it "Flea Hab." Now, he works on 5-foot waves and teaches unlikely surfers to ride with him to health and wellness. He said, "I have never known such joy in surfing."

True "joy rides" come from overcoming pain and suffering. May the joy of the Lord bless and keep you as you travel through this Advent season. May God bless and keep you as you move forward through repentance to forgiveness of sins, from the struggles you face to the joy of the Lord. Amen.

INVICTUS

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be, for my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years

Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

By William Ernest Henley, 1849-1903, British poet, critic and editor.