



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Repentance: The Movement from Sin and Death to Hope and Joy

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 4, 2016

The Second Sunday of Advent—Based on Matthew 3:1-12

Every year the Advent season reminds us to take note of the fact that the world can be a place where terrible dark things happen. It reminds us this year that the past century—since World War I—has been the worst thus far in terms of human crisis and loss of life. More than 125 million human beings have died during the past 100 years from state actions: war, genocide, induced famine; and from individual actions: murder, abuse and suicide.

Advent begins this year by reminding us of present challenges: continuing crisis in the Middle East, especially Syria; environmental decay, including, yes, global warming; ongoing racism, sexism, and homophobia; gun violence and income disparity between the haves and the have-nots. The Democrats reminded us during the election season that America is already great and the Republicans reminded us that it needs to be great again. And all of us are bid to ask this Advent: What does it mean for our country to be great?

And if this analysis is not enough, John the Baptist stands before us—bold, loud and brassy. In addition to global and national appraisal, he asks us to check our individual compasses—to check out the direction of our lives. He implores us to make sure we know where we are headed. He wants us to examine our priorities, our values, our behavior.

But we can be so stubborn about our own condition ... Oh we're past masters at analyzing others and the changes they need to make, but when it comes to the direction of our own lives, we don't believe any course alterations are needed.

I love the story of the two warships that were making night maneuvers. It was dark, visibility had deteriorated and patchy fog had rolled in. The crew on one ship called the captain to the bridge, where it was reported, "Light bearing on the starboard bow." The captain responded, "Is the light steady or moving astern?" "Steady, captain," was the response ... which meant danger ahead, the two ships were on a collision course! The captain radioed the other ship: "I'm the captain and I order you to change course by 20 degrees immediately." The reply came back: "Sir, I'm an ensign and you need to change your course by 20 degrees or there will be a severe ship wreck ... you see, I'm a lighthouse."

John the Baptist looks out to the religious and civic leaders of his surroundings and calls them a "brood of vipers!" He is talking to the stiff-necked, stubborn, set-in-their-ways nay-sayers, the joyless cynics, the self-righteous moralists, the squirrely back-biters who came out from Jerusalem to see a sideshow in the desert. And sounding a bit like Amos, John the Baptist calls them a bunch of biting and venomous snakes. He is saying that anyone, in any era, who injects poison into society's fabric, those who diminish hope and purpose, and squeeze the joy and fulfillment out of human community, are vipers.

We know these people in our day. They say things like: "That won't work; you're doing it all wrong; those people can't be part of our community; they are immoral; they are lazy; they are undeserving; they're from the wrong religion, the wrong country, the wrong race, gender or orientation; they're not welcome; they're from a different party."

John says, turn around, look again toward the source of all love and welcome and all forgiveness and goodness. No more sour grapes! Turn around, change direction—repent! And where does all of this repentance take us? From sin and death to hope and joy. But this business of repentance, confession, forgiveness, renewal and hope requires a receptive heart.

Anne Lamott grew up in an abusive home, and because of that intense trauma, she left home when she was seventeen. She lived on the streets and she paid for her addictions by selling her body for sex. Many years later after finding recovery and rehabilitation, she wrote: "I went around saying for a long time that I'm not one of those Christians who are heavily into repentance ... that I'm one of the other kind. But even though it was funny and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay that way. They say we are not punished *for* the sins that *by* the sins, but I started to feel punished by my unwillingness to receive or give forgiveness. By the time I decided to become one who was heavily into repentance and forgiveness, it was like trying to become a marathon runner in middle age. Several weeks into Advent one year I tried my best to exercise my newfound perspective ... but decided that I started with my sights too high, and I was only working on the troubles of others. As C. S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*: 'If we really want to learn how to repent and forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo. We had better start with ourselves.'" So, Anne Lamott writes, "I started with the one in the mirror. And what I found out was that when we turn toward God's love and mercy, real joy and hope can come our way."

Zephaniah sings of this hope and joy. "Rejoice, O people of God, for he is renewing you, he is healing the lame and gathering the rejected, he is bringing home all who have been shamed."

The Apostle Paul discovered this transformation when he writes to the Romans:

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace..."

I'm convinced that the purging fire John the Baptist is talking about in the gospel text is the fire of hope and joy, the kind of joy that doesn't ignore the reality of human suffering, but instead enters in and finds God already there. It's the hope and joy experienced when people of all walks of life sit down with each other the day after Thanksgiving here at St. Bart's and have a wonderful meal of fellowship and mutuality; it's the joy and hope experienced when a Bible study on Wednesday or a meditation or yoga class during the week enlivens someone's mind and heart; it's the hope and joy our choristers or choir members experience when they lift their voices and sing praise to God; it's the hope and joy known when so many of you in your work and your households give of your resources, your energy, your passion, your talents, with the primary motivation of bringing life to others; it's the hope and joy experienced when the resources of Episcopal Relief and Development show up when there has been a flood, or a fire, or an earthquake, or famine, or war.

Many of you know the timeless short story of O. Henry titled "The Gift of the Magi."

A poor young couple, who lived an obscure existence, wanted to bring joy to the other by securing the best gift possible for Christmas. She wanted to give him a gold chain for his watch; he wanted to give to her some combs for her long, beautiful hair. In order to buy the chain, the young wife had her hair cut and sold for wigs. In order to buy the combs, the young husband sold his watch and bought the combs. On Christmas Day, they both received the finest gift they'd ever received—they knew how much they were loved and they danced for joy!

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