

Sermon Text for December 13, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 John 1:6-8, 19-28 *“Advent and Repentance”*

So how are you doing? As we make our way through this time together as a church family I find that there are times in our common life as a church moments of clear celebration and moments of dread and breathtaking heartbreak. We are in a season of celebration. We were so pleased to be able to finish the filming of the children’s pageant last week during Sunday School while we were still in person so that we can show that on Christmas Eve at 4:30. If your child did not receive the present that we are giving out this year like we do every year, then please, please let me know and I can put it in your church mailbox or if you don’t have a mailbox we can be sure to get it to you somehow.

We are celebrating today the commissioning of the Harrar family as send them off to Kenya, I have to admit there is a part of me that is jealous just thinking about going back on the mission field and all that is involved in that. What a close walk with Christ you and your family are taking. What a celebration. We celebrate the welcoming into our church community and into a home owned by the church the Sands family who are transitioning from a life spent on the mission field back to the United States and they are using our home as a soft landing spot for the time being.

But we are also facing heartbreak as we once again find ourselves no longer together in the sanctuary as we brace for this current tragic wave of illness that is sweeping our community, our country, even the world. As we take a step back again we without a doubt experience a sense of loss, a sense of real loss in relationships, a loss in life spent together. During our time away babies have been born in our community and people have gone on to Jesus in their resurrection. We all mourn these losses in not being able to live out our lives in a shared way, even while we celebrate the life that is happening in the midst of this pandemic. So how are you doing?

Advent pulls us back to a time in Isaiah where the people of Israel were promised a better life other than the captivity in which they currently found themselves at the writing of Isaiah. Likewise it pulls us back to a life with Jesus’ disciples where they were waiting anxiously for the time that he would come back and instill his kingdom. Those events are promised and those events will happen, but in the future, so the people of Israel and Jesus’ disciples just had to wait until they happened. That is where we find ourselves. Jesus is coming back, we have to wait for

it and baptism is the sign and seal of that promise that we all carry for life. We saw that last week.

But while last week while we saw Advent and Baptism and we focused on God's action and God's initiative, today we look at repentance which is an awakening brought about by the Holy Spirit. This week we will see that while our getting ready starts with the initiative of God, we find that our getting ready has at its core the need for repentance, an act that we take. We find ourselves once again in our Scripture with the two most classic figures for Advent, both Isaiah and John the Baptist. Let's read in the Gospel of John.

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When we look at the term repentance especially in the Old Testament it means literally in the Hebrew to turn back or to retrace your steps in order to return to the correct way. As you know Stacy and I have loved doing section hiking along the Appalachian Trail. We have finished the states of Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia and dabbled in Virginia and Connecticut, so we have spent a lot of time on the trail. When you spend a lot of time you can find yourself so engrossed on the trail that you forget to look for the markers that are placed on the trail to ensure that you are going the right way. There are white hash marks on trees and rocks which tell you you are going the right way. Sometimes you will see a double hash mark and that tells us that a turn, a change in direction is coming your way.

When we are walking together for hours in the forest it is sometimes so engrossing and so captivating that you miss the hash marks and you find yourself just walking and then you realize there are no white marks to be seen around you. When that happens you have to turn around and go back to a place where you know you passed until you find another hash mark and then you have to start forward again. It doesn't happen often, but when it does happen you can't keep going straight hoping to find the hash marks, because you won't you have to turn around and go back the way you came in order to find where you left the path. Repentance is a retracing one's steps in order to return the right way.

In our lives we think that if we just start over then everything will be fine. If we just pretend that that person who insulted us or that person that I insulted will be fine over time and you just move forward without backing up and reconciling, then you are going to go deeper and deeper into the forest until who knows where you will end up. Repentance is a retracing one's steps in order to return to the right way.

In Isaiah we find the prophet making a declaration that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him and as a result he was able to be commissioned and sent out to do God's work. This

messenger of God had to be first touched with the Spirit of God, had to be prepared for the work that was ahead of them, and then they could move forward. So what was involved in this preparation? Let's look at the beginning of Isaiah and we will see how this prophet is prepared. Go to Isaiah 1:16-19 and what do you read? "wash yourselves clean, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, please for the widow." Wash yourself, make yourself clean, retrace your steps and remove that which separates you from God and then you can be ready for God's work. Repent, for God's kingdom requires workers who have repented and are now moving forward in God's Holy Spirit.

So once you have the Holy Spirit by your side after your repentance then you are ready to go out and do God's will. The disciple, the one being sent has to repent, that has to be a building block to their work. Sometimes we turn the tables around a bit and we think the only way that we can serve people is if the people themselves repent and then deserve what we have to offer. The life of a missionary is not to identify those who have repented and then serve them, but rather the life of the prophet Isaiah, and later we will see the life of the disciple of Jesus Christ begins with the worker in the field repenting and then those who receive them will be blessed.

Notice in vs.1-4 that you never hear about those who broken hearted repenting. That is not a condition to receiving the blessings of God. But you do read about the messenger, the disciple, the member of First Presbyterian having to repent and then being able to do the work of God. We make a mistake in our ministry when we place repentance as condition to ministry received. And sometimes we see repentance as being mandatory for those who receive our services, but then somehow optional for us who provide the services in the name of Jesus Christ. That is completely backwards to what we read in Scripture.

Let's go to the New Testament and our friend John the Baptist. You do know that John is a pastor's kid, a priest's kid, a missionary kid like Simeon and me. He was that rebellious kid whose dad was a priest and so could get away with just about anything, for me it was a double whammy because I was the youngest of 4 boys and the three before me were angels so I could do no wrong even as I did a lot of wrong. John's role was clear. Three times he states in vs.20 that he was not the Messiah because there was a rumor going around that he was. He just calls himself that voice crying out in the wilderness.

We have always paired John the Baptist with his message of Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. We hear him preach this in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This message of repentance is central to his message and central to our understanding of Advent as John is that

messenger. But wouldn't you know the Gospel of John never once has John say it while the other Gospels is filled with this message from John. We find this overarching theme with John where John's call to repentance is intimately connected to the imminent arrival of God's kingdom and the coming of the Messiah. Jesus himself calls his disciples to repentance in the other Gospels and it is directly linked to a decision for or against him.

While in the Old Testament this message of repentance, this retracing of our steps, was focused upon the nation of Israel as a whole. The repentance needed to be a national step together. The prophets when they came around, like Isaiah, focus on a repentance that is an interior conversion which is manifested in personal acts of justice. Look at Micah 6:6-8. This is an individual asking how can I repent, with burnt offerings? No but with a repentance that impacts the way in which we interact with those around us which proves that God has a hold on our lives.

This theme is carried on in the New Testament and which John the Baptist takes up as he repeats Isaiah's words by demanding that the way of the Lord be made straight. But I want to go back to that point that I made earlier. There is no requirement for those who are receiving what we bring to a repentance that allows them or makes them worthy to be ministered to. This can be a change in philosophy that can make many uncomfortable. We read Isaiah 61:4 while we were on a work group a few years ago in Houston and we were standing in a house torn down to its studs and absolutely decimated by Hurricane Harvey. The whole time we were there the family never showed up, they never said thank you, and so it would have been normal to feel somewhat put out because they didn't thank you they didn't, some could see, deserve to be helped.

That's not the way our God acts. Even while we were yet sinners. Our food bank has a whole assortment of customers, some of whom are demanding and are difficult to work with. Ministry and mission is messy. We have a hard time finding families for our New Beginning homes and so the tendency is to think that we should pause the ministry because it is too difficult and there are many who don't follow the goals that we lay out, we can't be enablers. I am very comfortable in enabling the poor, the widow, the orphan. We can't open our church to student who don't have internet because we don't want strangers wandering around, who knows what they could be up to. You welcomed me when I was a stranger...

We expect recipients to be grateful for our work and when they are not then we don't want to do the work any more. We expect ministry to go in a way that is linear and black and white, but God works in the margins and so we often miss him.

It's been a tough week for the church. My emphasis my 10 years here has been on relationships and we have been broken and shattered this week and we have to find a way to put the pieces back together again. Advent is a time for all of us to repent and to turn back. When this is over we will have to repent, all of us, starting with me, and get back on the straight path that is laid before us. Advent is a time that as disciples we have to acknowledge that only through our repentance can we be better equipped to serve those around us. Amen.