A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Advent’s Path*

Matthew 3.1-12

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This season, the Advent and Christmas season, can be the most confusing time of the year. It’s complex for individuals with a lot swirling around inside them, and it’s complicated for groups of people who collectively have very different experiences and expectations of this time of year. And then you come to church and standing right there in the middle of all the pretty things is John the Baptist, out there telling us all: repent. It’s a complex time.

Some of the complexities have nothing to do with John. Should we expect the cashier to say Happy Holidays in order to be inclusive to all religious traditions. Or should she say Merry Christmas since we’re supposedly a Christian nation or something. Or should she say Blessed Advent since it’s not actually Christmas yet, so actually happy holidays makes more sense than Merry Christmas anyway. Or should we simply be grateful to meet a human anywhere greeting us instead of a robot or a computer screen.

It’s a complex time.

It’s complex is other ways too, in more emotional ways. For some it’s the most wonderful time of the year. Families reunite, children come home, meals are prepared, there’s lots to do. For others it’s the time of year to dread: families reunite, children come home, meals have to be prepared, and there is lots to do. It can cut both ways. And there are others for whom having a family to reunite with would be beyond magical. This is a time of year of great joy and poignant pain, sometimes within the same person in the same moment.

Oh this is a complex time of year. A sacred time celebrated by spending too much money. A simple time marked by not having enough time. A season of lights in the darkest days of the year. How are we to do all of this?

Enter John the Baptist, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near.” John’s looming presence in annual Advent scripture readings hardly seems to resolve the complexities. Can you imagine getting a Christmas card from John: Happy holidays, you brood of vipers. Come see me sometime. Love, John.

Indeed John’s presence in Advent regularly stumps preachers. Yes, he’s preparing the way for Jesus and we’re preparing the way for Christmas, but this hardly seems like the way to do it: telling people to repent. Preachers wonder: should I be doing that too? It’s not that we’re averse to doing so. Give us some Sundays in Lent with the Son of God on the cross looming ahead of us and repentance rolls of our tongues. But give us some Sundays in December with the child of Mary in a manger in our sights, and repentance isn’t our first language.

Even if it is for John. John stands at the fork in the road of the two paths Christians take in Advent: the celebratory way and the penitential way. One is the happy way of Advent. On the happy way, Advent is celebrated as a season of joyful preparation for Christmas. It’s the Christmas plane taxiing down the eggnog runway. In happy Advent, we feast, we sing lovely romantic songs, we stretch Christmas out like the stretch Armstrong toy I remember opening as a child. Pull on it, it stretches and stretches as far as you want it to go.

This way of doing Advent can seamlessly fits with the secular version of the holidays. Christmas and its holiday equivalents stretch to Black Friday and back into November and even before Halloween. Before long, we’ll be eating July 4th hot dogs while they set up holiday trees and lights. It’s all one big happy pumpkin-spiced Christmas celebration just stretching as far as it can go.

The other Advent path, the penitential path, is an ancient one in the church’s practice, now mostly unknown and where it is known, mostly ignored. Even growing up in a church that made a big deal of Advent, this was a path I knew nothing about. Even growing up with Advent, Advent was a time of celebration, anticipation, joy, wonder. It was pre-Christmas.

I didn’t know yet about this other path, the path of Advent as a little Lent--Advent as a penitential season, not feasting but fasting, not songs of celebration but songs of lament. That’s what all the purple and blue colors represent it turns out; in church those are solemn colors. While everyone is searching for the perfect gift, preparing a table richly laden, and pre-celebrating Christmas, in this way of Advent we search our hearts, offer prayers for forgiveness and for those who are suffering, and pray we may be found ready when the Lord comes.

If you take the harder way of Advent, Christmas still comes, but it waits a while, waits its turn while we wait for the coming of the Lord whose day is near. There are two paths of Advent. Which to take? The happy way or the hard way? Is it a time to celebrate or a time to be solemn? To Feast or to fast?

John stands at this fork in the road to Bethlehem saying to all who venture out to see him: “Repent! The Kingdom of heaven is near.” And it seems entirely obvious which Advent path John’s pointy finger is directing us.

But I’m telling you, preachers trip on their shoelaces right here at this point. It’s obvious which direction John is telling us to go, but we don’t want to go that way. We don’t want to tell you to go that way. The happy way is a lot more fun, it’s a lot more familiar, and besides, we need some light and goodness and generosity in our lives. We need more of it. Even if generosity is coupled with overconsumption and feasting with gluttony, and all those other problems, can we afford to let go of any single place that brings joy into the world, even if we’re celebrating ahead of time? No one wants to be Ebenezer Scrooge, even though Ebenezer comes from the old name for altar raised to God. Who wants to be a Scrooge, even presented as an altar dedicated to God? We need mirth, we need joy, and we need delight even if we have to buy our way to it. So, we wave to John from a distance as we pass by the other side of the road, as far as we can get.

But what have we done for you and with you in taking the path of least repentance? We think we have avoided some archaic, ascetic path of sadness for an enlightened path of happiness, but we’ve misunderstood the way of repentance, and in doing so, we’ve misread the map to Bethlehem. Because the path John points to isn’t the path of despair but the path of true light, not the way of emptiness but a way toward true fulfillment; he’s pointing us not down the path of perpetual sorrow, but the path to actual joy.

Where did we get the idea that repentance is a bad thing, doesn’t belong in this season, or that John’s scalding message isn’t actually good news? For all the ascetic severity and oddities of John, here is someone burning with a conviction that we need to change, that change is possible, and that this is the time to let God transform us. The call to repent is actually good news because it means there’s still time to do it. You’re not doomed. Thanks be to God.

For Jews, like John was, repentance isn’t just a feeling of inner sorrow for sins. It’s a whole process called *teshuvah*. There may be pain in *teshuvah,* but it’s more like growing pain, the pain of muscles knitting together to form a stronger, healthy you. It’s root is in a word that means return: in repentance we return back to our center, we are restored to the values of ourselves, our community, and God. It’s all seen as a happy process. To be invited into a process and called to one and led into one by which change is possible and a path is put forward and one in which we are given guidance to return to the center of what is good—this is great joy that someone still thinks it’s possible. And indeed, it is.

The process has been summarized in a few steps: recognizing your sins as sins, feeling remorse for them, desisting from the sin, making restitution if possible for the wrongdoing, and confessing the sin to God. Repentance is all these things together, a turning away from what was to what will be. The word repentance means turning around, starting over, taking another direction, choosing another course. “The emphasis is less on what is wrong with what we’re doing now and more on what is right and important and necessary about what we’ll do differently.” (David Lose, In the Meantime). Repentance often begins with awareness and desire for God. We become aware that our actions are in some way out of step with God’s deep desires for our lives and all the world. You realize God is pointing you one way, you’ve been traveling another way, and you change course.

What John offers is hope that we do not have to be bound to our past, to what we have done, what we have not done, what we have undone, or overdone, or redone over and over. We can be free. We can be made new. We can be reborn. Is this not the clear symbol of baptism, John’s, the Lord’s, and ours? We can start again, washed clean. And not just individuals--but if we take Isaiah’s words to heart—all creation is being made new.

The path of repentance, when you think of it like that, isn’t a sorrowful thing but a path of deep joy to who God made you to be and what God made all creation to be. Wherever you begin—whether that’s a place of sorrow or joy, you enter a journey of spiritual growth and healing. And that’s very good news.

Advent then, we see, isn’t the choice between a hard way and a happy way. We set off on the one path to peace and to freedom in God from wherever we are beginning the journey. On this journey is joy in the sorrow, growth in the pain, feasting from the fasting. Purple is the liturgical color repentance but also the color of royalty. The King of Kings is coming soon.

And maybe that doesn’t resolve all the complexities that swirl around this time of year, but it does simplify one thing: there is only one spiritual path after all. It’s the path your heart yearns for: to lose yourself in wonder, love, and praise. What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent? (Karl Barth)

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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