

The “R” Words of Advent: Repentance

Mathew 3: 1-13

Therefore, you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

That passage of Scripture found in Mathew’s gospel is not just practical advice, but a warning to God’s people to be prepared to meet Jesus for He will return without even a moment’s notice. It is my hope that this series of Advent messages entitled “R Words of Advent” will help each of us do that very thing.

There was once an elementary school student who had trouble pronouncing the letter “r”, so her teacher gave her a sentence to practice at home to help her learn how. It was “Robert gave Richard a rap in the ribs for roasting the rabbit so rare”. A few days later, the teacher asked her student to recite the sentence so she could see how she was progressing. She quickly rattled it off- Bob gave Dick a poke in the side for not cooking the bunny enough. She avoided the “r” words, just like many people today. She avoided them because they were not easy to say. We avoid some “R” words because they are not easy to do.

The “R” word we looked at last week was readiness. The question was are we ready for the real Christmas, the return of Jesus? This morning we will be looking at another “R” word, one that first came from a messenger of God proclaiming the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Repent is one of those words. When was the last time you said the word, or for that matter heard someone else talk about it? The whole topic of repentance is troublesome, as it forces us to deal with another uncomfortable subject- sin. Repentance (and sin) are intrinsically linked together with Advent, the season of preparation for the celebration of the birth and Second Coming of Jesus Christ and we avoid them at our own risk.

Stop for a moment and consider the miraculous birth of Christ. The creator of the heavens and the earth, the creator of everything in and on them, the all-powerful, all knowing eternal God that has no beginning and no end, chose to come to earth in the form of a human being, and as a powerless, defenseless little child at that. Thousands of years before the virgin Mary gave birth to the Christ child, one of the signs of His coming was foretold by the prophet Isaiah in 40:3-5.

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Those prophetic words are a message of readiness, repentance and restoration. They were fulfilled in the preaching of John the Baptist. Both prophets tell us that the coming of the Lord, the birth of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus are no small thing. His birth was the single event that changed the world forever, for God had finally been revealed to His people. The faithful Israelites and those who would follow them would need to prepare, "make His paths straight" or as John the Baptist says "repent". **Repent means to change direction, change our hearts and change our minds**, to turn away from our sin and turn towards the One who has come to fix our brokenness and save us from our sins. Both prophets tell us that the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and it was. It was revealed in Bethlehem, it was revealed on Calvary, it was revealed in the empty tomb, and it will be revealed one more time when Jesus returns to earth a second time to make things right once and for all.

Today many understand why He came; some may even believe how and where He came. The belief that Christ came into the world to save sinners, even you and I, is a fundamental part of our Christian faith and the way of salvation. **Repentance is the first step in our faith journey in Christ**, and an ongoing part of a believer's life. It brings a radical change in the way we see God and understand His will for our lives.

Helping each other recognize our need for a Savior is part of our mission as a church. The greatest obstacle to we face in our struggle to grow in faith and love is not seeing the need to repent of our sins. Sometimes we confuse regret or remorse with repentance. Though they are similar, these words are not synonyms for one another where there may be used interchangeably. Let's look at the differences. Regret simply means to be sorry for something- mentally. Stepping on the scale, we might regret eating so much at Thanksgiving. Paying a traffic fine, we might regret running the stop sign. Mailing back an RSVP, we regret having to miss out on a fun function because of having another commitment for something we don't want to do. Regret is suffering consequences for our actions.

Remorse is similar, only there is an emotional element attached. Oftentimes guilt is involved, or sadness that makes us hurt emotionally, not just physically. Remorse is feeling sorry for doing something that causes hurt to someone else or to God. Repentance, on the other hand takes regret, remorse and adds corrective action to the mix.

Let me illustrate with an example. A young bride wished to surprise her husband, so she baked a special casserole for dinner using a recipe from an old family recipe. After the meal, she asked him how it was. The man honestly answered that he didn't like it, and soon an argument erupted. No matter how he answered the question, he would regret it. If he was dishonest and said he liked it, he would have to suffer through it again in the future. If he was honest and told the truth, his sore back from sleeping on the couch would be a reminder that telling the truth is sometimes painful.

He would feel remorse from knowing that he had hurt his new bride's feelings and caused her emotional pain. To repent, he would tell her he was sorry for being insensitive and produce a big bouquet of roses (and a cookbook) to atone for his mistake.

Now that might be a silly example, but it does help us understand the difference between the three. Did you notice which one restored the relationship? Remorse and regret can't fix a broken relationship, but they can move us to do something that can. It is much the same between God and humanity.

Sin, even unintentional sin, has damaged the relationship between creator and creation. God sent His Son Jesus Christ to restore that broken relationship. Repentance means we acknowledge our sinfulness, turn to Christ, and ask for and receive His forgiveness. Without repentance, there can be no forgiveness. Without forgiveness, there is a broken relationship. Without a relationship, there is loneliness and eternal suffering. **Repentance restores relationships.**

It is significant that the very first sermon Jesus preached was on repentance. Any guesses on His last? (Mathew 23) The theme of repentance and restoration is woven throughout the Scriptures, and it is the central message of the Gospel. Repentance means we have a new way of thinking, a changing of our minds and a change of our direction. A truly radical change in lifestyle comes when we accept the fact that we are a sinful people in need of a Saving Christ.

In Jesus day, it was the Pharisees who refused to acknowledge that very truth. They thought their heritage and their religion was enough to reconcile them with God. John the Baptist addresses their ignorance in verses 9-10 and warns of the consequences of that flawed way of thinking:

Verse 9: and do not think to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as *our father.*' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Verse 10: and even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

It is repentance, not religion, that will restore our broken relationship with God. Therefore, you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

That verse is even more relevant today, as that hour is now some 2000 years closer to us. It is my prayer this morning that Jesus will return soon, and that we will be ready to meet Him when He comes. Let us pay attention to the signs of His coming, let us grieve and mourn for our sins, let us repent and prepare a straight path for the child and the King. May we see His glory once again... Amen