

**Second Sunday of Advent B
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

REPENTANCE

LAST SUNDAY WE BEGAN OUR ADVENT SEASON OF 2017 - WITH A FOCUS ON THE WORD "FAITHFULNESS." HOW IS IT - IN THE MIDST OF OUR STRUGGLES AND DOUBTS - EVEN ANGER SOMETIMES AT GOD - HOW IS IT THAT WE STAY FAITHFUL TO GOD AND HOW IS IT THAT GOD STAYS FAITHFUL TO US.? THE WORDS OF THE SCRIPTURE TEXTS FOR THAT DAY AND THE HEART-FELT WORDS OF BARRY'S LAMENT - ANSWERED THOSE QUESTIONS FOR US. WE STAY FAITHFUL TO GOD AS WE STRUGGLE TO SEE AND EXPERIENCE GOD IN OUR LIVES EVEN WHEN, MOST ESPECIALLY WHEN, WE JUST CAN'T SENSE GOD'S PRESENCE. AND GOD - WELL, GOD STAYS FAITHFUL TO US - NO MATTER WHAT.

TODAY, IT'S THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT - AND ALWAYS - THIS SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT BRINGS US THE STORY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AND HIS STRONG AND POWERFUL CALL FOR THE PEOPLE TO REPENT SO THAT THE WAY FOR THE MESSIAH MIGHT BE PREPARED. REPENTANCE - NOT A WORD WE HEAR TOO OFTEN ANY MORE - AND MORE SO, IN THIS 21ST CENTURY NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE OF OURS

-I'M NOT SURE WE'RE VERY GOOD AT REPENTANCE - EITHER IN HERE OR OUT THERE!

FOR EXAMPLE, SOME YEARS AGO WHEN I WAS SERVING AS PASTOR OF ST. PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN STATESVILLE, NC, AS PART OF A LENTEN WORSHIP SERVICE THE WORSHIPPERS WERE GIVEN PIECES OF PAPER AND ASKED TO SIT IN SILENCE FOR A FEW MINUTES, REFLECT ON THEIR SINS - SINS EITHER OF COMMISSION OR OMISSION - AND THEN WRITE THOSE SINS OUT ON A PIECE OF PAPER. THEY THEN BROUGHT THOSE PIECES OF PAPER FORWARD AND PLACED THEM IN A FIREPROOF CONTAINER - AND WE BURNED THEM...WITH A REMINDER THAT GOD BOTH FORGIVES AND FORGETS OUR SINS. ON THE WAY OUT, ONE VERY DEVOTED AND ACTIVE MEMBER SAID TO ME, "YOU KNOW, THAT WAS OK, BUT I JUST COULDN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO WRITE ON MY PAPER." (I TOLD HER SHE COULD BEGIN BY WRITING THAT DOWN!) BUT I'M GUESSING SHE ISN'T ALONE. HOW EASY IT IS NOT TO OWN OR ACKNOWLEDGE THE WRONGS WE DO. HOW EASY IT IS TO COME TO WORSHIP AND SAY THE WORDS OF CONFESSION - WORDS WE SPOKE THIS MORNING - AND HEAR THE WORDS OF ABSOLUTION -WITHOUT GIVING THEM MUCH THOUGHT AT ALL.

AND OUT COUNTRY – OH MY! HOW FAR WE NORTH AMERICANS ARE FROM AN AWARENESS OF OUR HUMAN TENDENCY TO SIN – AGAINST GOD, AGAINST OTHERS, EVEN AGAINST OURSELVES – AND WORSE – HOW FAR WE ARE FROM AN AWARENESS AND A WILLINGNESS TO SAY WE’RE SORRY. LOOK AT WASHINGTON! OUR POLITICIANS – ON BOTH SIDES OF THE AISLE – MODEL EVERY DAY THEIR INABILITY TO OWN A WRONG, CONFESS IT AND ASK FOR FORGIVENESS.

EVERYWHERE – IN HERE AND OUT THERE – REPENTANCE SEEMS TO BE AN ANTIQUATED OUTDATED PRACTICE! BUT YET, HERE WE ARE, ON THIS SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT WITH THE WORD “REPENTANCE” RIGHT IN OUR FACES.

IN MARK’S GOSPEL, THE PRIMARY GOSPEL FOR THIS NEW CHURCH YEAR, THERE IS NO BIRTH NARRATIVE OF THE CHRIST CHILD – JUST THAT POWERFUL OPENING SENTENCE – “THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.” AND THEN, IMMEDIATELY HERE COMES JOHN, PROCLAIMING A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS SO THAT THE WAY MAY BE PREPARED FOR THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH.

AND HERE’S THE FASCINATING THING! PEOPLE FROM THE WHOLE JUDEAN COUNTRYSIDE AND ALL THE PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM

WERE GOING OUT TO HIM AND WERE BAPTIZED BY HIM IN THE RIVER JORDAN, CONFESSING THEIR SINS.

WE HAVE TO ASK, WHAT WAS IT THAT WAS SO APPEALING TO ALL THOSE PEOPLE? IT SURELY WAS NOT HIS DRESS OR HIS DIET – CAMEL’S HAIR FOR CLOTHES AND LOCUSTS AND WILD HONEY FOR FOOD – IT SURELY WAS NOT THAT. NO, IT WAS HIS MESSAGE – HIS MESSAGE THAT THE MESSIAH IS COMING – THE ONE THOSE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL HAD LONGED FOR OH SO MANY YEARS...THE ONE WHO WOULD SET THEM FREE FROM THEIR CAPTORS...THE ONE WHO WOULD RESTORE THEM TO A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR GOD. AND TO HASTEN THAT COMING, JOHN WAS TELLING THEM, THEY HAD TO GET READY. THEY HAD TO PREPARE THE WAY, AND THAT PREPARATION CALLED FOR HIS BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF THEIR SINS.

THAT’S WHY THEY CAME. THEY WERE HUNGRY FOR HEALING, HUNGRY FOR RESTORATION. THEY WERE HUNGRY FOR THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH. AND BEST OF ALL, JOHN’S BAPTISM WITH ITS CALL FOR REPENTANCE ASSURED THEM THAT THE MESSIAH WAS COMING NOT IN WRATH OR ANGER OR PUNISHMENT – BUT IN GRACE AND MERCY AND LOVE – LIKE A SHEPHERD WHO FEEDS HIS FLOCK, WHO

GATHERS THE LAMBS IN HIS ARMS, AND WHO GENTLY LEADS THE MOTHER SHEEP. NO WONDER THEY FLOCKED TO THE WILDERNESS TO BE BAPTIZED BY JOHN! THIS WAS INDEED, THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.

YOU KNOW, JOHN'S MESSAGE IS JUST AS RELEVANT FOR US TODAY, MAYBE EVEN MORE SO, AS IT WAS FOR THOSE PEOPLE OF JUDEA AND JERUSALEM SO LONG AGO. I'M JUST NOT SURE WE'RE AS AWARE OF OUR NEED AS WERE THEY. BUT THE TRUTH IS, WE, TOO, LIVE IN A BROKEN AND SINFUL WORLD. WE ARE BROKEN AND SINFUL PEOPLE ENSLAVED TO MANY CAPTORS...GREED, ADDICTIONS, ARROGANCE, POWER, SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, CLOSED EYES AND CLOSED HEARTS...TO NAME A FEW. AND MORE SO, WE ARE, TOO OFTEN, IN A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR GOD EITHER BY CHOICE OR BY INDIFFERENCE. WE, TOO, ARE A HUNGRY PEOPLE - HUNGRY FOR HEALING, FOR RESTORATION TO A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR GOD. THAT MAKES JOHN'S PROCLAMATION OF A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS FOR US AS WELL, FOR IT ASSURES US, AS IT DID THEM, THAT GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS ALWAYS THE GIFT OF OUR REPENTANCE. AND THAT'S THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD.

IT IS, YOU KNOW, THAT ASSURANCE OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS THAT SETS US FREE TO TRULY CONFESS OUR SINS. KNOWING THAT GOD FORGIVES, WE CAN NAME OUR SINS ONE BY ONE TO GOD...AND WE CAN OWN AND CLAIM THOSE SINS AS OUR OWN – NOT SHIFTING THE BLAME TO ANYONE ELSE. WE CAN GO THOSE WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST AND ASK FOR THEIR FORGIVENESS. WE EVEN CAN WRITE THEM OUT ON A PIECE OF PAPER – AND THAT OPPORTUNITY WILL BE AVAILABLE AT OUR SERVICE OF HEALING THIS COMING WEDNESDAY AT 6PM AS WE HERE AT INCARNATION PREPARE FOR THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH. WE CAN DO THAT, BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE A GOD WHO HEARS OUR CONFESSION, A GOD WHO FORGIVES OUR SINS AND REMEMBERS THEM NO MORE.

TRUE CONFESSION, YOU SEE, LEADS TO TRUE REPENTANCE – AND TRUE REPENTANCE LEADS US TO A CHANGE OF MIND, A CHANGE OF HEART AND WILL AND BEHAVIOR. SOMEONE HAS WRITTEN, “THE PURPOSE OF REPENTANCE IS NOT THE AVOIDANCE OF PUNISHMENT. RATHER, REPENTANCE UNDERGIRDS A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. REPENTANCE TURNS US TO A LIFE-GIVING DIRECTION AND LETS US PLACE TRUST WHERE TRUST WILL BE UPHELD.”

THE STORY IS TOLD OF A YOUNG PRIEST WHOSE FIRST CALL WAS TO A PARISH ON AN ISLAND IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC. HE HADN'T BEEN THERE VERY LONG WHEN A YOUNG WOMAN CAME TO HIM AND SAID, "FATHER, I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT EVERY DAY I SIT DOWN AND TALK WITH JESUS." WHEN HE COMMENDED HER ON HER PRAYER LIFE, SHE RESPONDED, "THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEAN. I MEAN THAT EVERY DAY JESUS COMES AND SITS DOWN WITH ME ON THE WALL OUT THERE BY THE SEA AND WE TALK ABOUT MANY THINGS." "YOU DON'T MEAN YOU ACTUALLY SEE JESUS?" THE PRIEST RESPONDED. "OH, YES," SHE SAID. "I REALLY SEE JESUS EVERY DAY." NOT KNOWING EXACTLY WHAT TO DO, THE YOUNG PRIEST CALLED HIS BISHOP AND TOLD HIM THE WOMAN'S STORY. CONCERNED THAT THIS WOMAN WAS MAKING AN IMPOSSIBLE CLAIM THAT COULD BRING NOTORIETY NOT ONLY TO THE PRIEST AND HIS LITTLE PARISH BUT TO THE WHOLE CHURCH, THE BISHOP TOLD THE YOUNG PRIEST THAT HER HALLUCINATIONS MUST BE CHALLENGED. "AND," HE SAID, "I KNOW JUST HOW TO DO IT. GO TO HER AND ASK HER TO ASK JESUS WHAT SIN IT WAS THAT I, AS A YOUNG PRIEST MYSELF, COMMITTED AND CONFESSED TO GOD AND TO MY BISHOP. SHE WON'T BE ABLE TO TELL YOU. YOU CAN THEN CONFRONT HER DELUSIONS - AND GET HER SOME HELP." SO, THE YOUNG PRIEST

DID AS HE WAS TOLD. THE YOUNG WOMAN THOUGHT IT WAS A CURIOUS REQUEST BUT SHE AGREED TO ASK JESUS ABOUT THE BISHOP'S SIN. SHE'D COME BY THE CHURCH THE NEXT DAY, SHE SAID, RIGHT AFTER HER TALK WITH JESUS. THE YOUNG PRIEST WAITED ANXIOUSLY. HE SAW HER COMING UP THE PATH TO THE CHURCH. AND RAN OUT TO MEET HER. "WELL," HE SAID, "DID YOU SEE JESUS THIS MORNING?" "YES," SHE REPLIED, "EVERY DAY." "DID YOU ASK HIM ABOUT THE BISHOP'S SIN?" "I DID," "WELL, THEN," HE SAID, "WHAT DID JESUS SAY?" AND SHE REPLIED, "JESUS SAID TO TELL YOU AND THE BISHOP THAT HE DOESN'T REMEMBER."

**CONFESSION – REPENTANCE – FORGIVENESS – FORGETFULNESS!
IT'S TIME TO PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE COMING OF THE GOOD NEWS
OF JESUS CHRIST THE SON OF GOD." AMEN.**