

“ADVENT PEACE”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 3:1-12, Isaiah 11:1-10

(12-08-19) Advent 2

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Those are the words of John the Baptist, the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness. Dressed in camel's hair, eating an early version of the Keto diet of locusts and wild honey, if you ever wanted someone to scare you into repentance, John would have been the one.

What do **you** think of when you hear the word, “repent?” Maybe you think of a guy standing with a sign, usually dressed to look like a modern day John the Baptist, trying to scare people into getting on their knees and begging God for forgiveness. Or maybe you remember some preacher from your childhood glowering down from the pulpit admonishing you to either turn or burn. Usually when we hear the word repent, it's accompanied by an “or else...” whether explicitly or implicitly. And yet, that's not what the word means at its heart. Yes, it means that we should be sorry for things we shouldn't have done, or for things that we should have done but haven't done. But it's far more than that.

The root of the word repentance lies in the idea of **turning**, going in a different direction, **a re-orienting**. Repentance is not so much about being scared of God and begging for forgiveness, but a **shift in orientation**. Repentance is a turning away from the wilderness of self-centeredness and self-sufficiency, and a turning toward God. In the Bible, repentance is not something to be **dreaded**, but something to be **celebrated**.

A turning of the whole person toward God.¹ I've said it before, but I think it bears repeating. We don't repent so that God **will** forgive us; we repent because God **has** forgiven us. Jesus died on the cross so that our sins would be forgiven. He's been resurrected from the dead so that not even death would have the final word. Jesus lives because God will not allow evil and darkness to ultimately prevail. God did all of this before any one of us here ever got on our knees and asked for forgiveness. Forgiveness is what God has **already** provided, made available to every person. What we need to do is to **accept it and turn** and **re-orient** our lives towards a different way, a different path, what we need to do is to repent **because** we have been forgiven.

And that's the hard part for us. It's hard to change course. Even though we know that we're pointed in the wrong direction, changing course, re-orienting the direction of our lives is difficult. This Friday marked the 30th anniversary of a horrible event in Canadian history, the murder of 14 women at the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal. In that horrible incident Marc Lepine separated the women from the men, he let the men go, then he shot the women. It's reported that he asked the women if they knew why he had separated them from the men and when one of the women replied, no, he said that he was fighting feminism. When one of the women replied that they were just students, that they just wanted to study and live ordinary lives, Lepine responded, "You're women, you're going to be engineers. You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists." Then he shot them.

Three decades later things haven't changed as much as we might have hoped. In an article in the Globe and Mail this week, it was reported that at least 118 women and

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological*

girls have been murdered across Canada so far this year.² Nneka MacGregor, executive director of the Women's Centre for Social Justice states, "It raises the question, what can we as society do better? Do differently? There's a lot of time, energy, good intentions, and resources being allocated. And yet the shift in the public consciousness, and the shift in the actual numbers of women who've died – we're not making that type of dent that we want to make."

Why is that?

It makes you wonder whether part of the problem is that we pay **lip service** to addressing issues like misogyny or sexism, racism or domestic violence, but these are, for the most part, **just platitudes**, things we say because we know we should, **but how much do our actions back up what we say?**

On Friday you couldn't listen to the news or open a Canadian news website without being confronted by the anniversary of the worst mass shooting in Canadian history. By Saturday it was difficult to find any mention of the event on the news websites. Life moves on, our attention shifts to the next new thing. But not enough real or lasting change takes place.

When John was preaching repentance in the Jordan, many were coming to him to be baptized. Even the Pharisees and the Sadducees were showing up. But John sees through their empty gestures and words. **You brood of vipers, he says to them, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.** You think just because you pay lip service, just because you say Abraham is our ancestor, that things will be okay?

² <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-polytechnique-massacre-montreal-massacre-6-decembre-1989-national-day/>

Talk is cheap, don't just say it, do it. **Change** your orientation, **choose** a new direction, **bear fruit, repent.**

Repentance calls for more than wishful thinking, it calls for concrete action. To be re-oriented is more than a state of mind, it is a state of will, not only thinking, **but doing.** The call to repentance invites us to an Advent re-orientation, to stop doing what we've always done and hoping that things will be different, **and to start doing different things.** We believe that God has come to us in Jesus of Nazareth and we believe that Jesus the Christ will return to creation to bring consummation to what God has begun. If we believe this, then we are called to be re-oriented to the future God has in mind for us and for God's creation.

On this second Sunday in Advent, this Sunday of peace, we read of God's peaceable kingdom through the words of the prophet Isaiah. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Isaiah's words may seem to be just a pipe dream, **but that dream lies in the hand of the one who sent us Jesus, and who has promised to send him to us again.** In this time between the first and second Advent of Christ, it's time to pause and to check the direction of our lives. **Which way are we facing? Do we need to be re-oriented?**

Our Session has been reading a fascinating book called, Future Faith. It explores the trends that are taking place as Christianity moves toward a faith that looks very

different from the one we are familiar with. One of the chapters explores the difference between the bounded set and the centered set. If you're a mathematician, you probably are familiar with the terms, if not, let me try to explain quickly.

A bounded set is a collection of all objects **which possess the defining characteristics which determine the membership of the set.** So, dogs would be a bounded set.

As long as a dog were a dog, whether large or small, a Poodle or a Pomeranian, a Shepherd or a Sheltie, three legged or four legged, as long as you were a dog, you would be in the set. A cat would never be a dog no matter how similar they might be as hairy pets. Cats are not dogs.

There's a boundary and you're either inside or outside.

Christians would be a bounded set and we would be different from non-Christians.

We would be defined by certain definitive characteristics that are perceivable.

Maintaining boundaries are important in bounded sets.

Now, a centered set is different.

It's a collection of all objects which are **moving towards a well-defined center.**

Christians, in a centered set model, would be defined because of our center, Jesus

Christ and the values of the kingdom of God. But more important than a set of

defining characteristics which will determine whether you're in or out, **in the centered**

set, it's about movement, direction. So, in a centered set understanding of

Christianity, someone who is far from the center, maybe someone who is very new to

the faith, someone with little to no knowledge of scripture, or of the traditional beliefs

of the Christian faith, **as long as they were oriented to the center, as long as they**

were moving towards the center, they would be considered part of the set, they

would belong. Boundaries are less important in a centered set. In a centered set,

there would be recognition of variation among Christians.

Both ideas are important in describing Christianity and Christians, but in a world moving towards a future faith which is unlike our past, maybe the centered set holds more promise.

You might be thinking Victor's losing his mind! Why is he talking about cats and dogs? What does this have to do with repentance? Well, it seems that there may be some, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who think that they are insiders, children of Abraham. In a bounded set, people might consider themselves inside the boundaries, **but their orientation maybe away from the center.** There may be lots of chatter, but little to no action. Repentance becomes just an idea, an abstract proposition, **but it lacks conviction, it bears no fruit.** But in a centered set, what's truly important **isn't your proximity to the center, but your orientation to it.** Repentance is about turning, **whether you're close to the center or far from it,** it's about turning and being oriented to Jesus, to the ways of his kingdom, to his love and grace and justice. If we are oriented towards the strong center, if we're moving in the right direction, whether we've been Christians all our lives or we're just thinking about becoming one, **if we are moving towards Jesus, it's more likely that we're bearing fruit today, rather than resting on the laurels of fruit borne in the past.**

Is God calling us to repent, to leave aside the past and to embrace the future peace God has in mind for us? Is this the time for an Advent re-orientation? Richard Rohr has written that we don't think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking. Maybe that's our problem when it comes to issues like our response to misogyny or sexism, racism or domestic violence. We can't continue to do what we've always done and expect different results. We can talk about it, we can think about it, **but if we don't really do anything new in how we live about it, what**

will change? We need to start doing different things, start living in new ways, we need to be re-oriented, we need to truly repent.

There are so many places where our repentance is needed, but this morning I want to focus on the issue I brought up from the news this week. We need to move toward the center, towards a Jesus who treated all people with dignity, compassion, mercy and love. We need to be oriented toward the one who treated women in ways that his society found scandalous. Some of his closest friends were women like Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene. He spoke to a Samaritan woman and changed her life, he healed the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, he healed a bleeding woman who would have been considered unclean, he was anointed by a woman who was labeled a 'sinner,' he would not condemn a woman caught in adultery brought before him alone. Jesus invited women to be the first witnesses of his resurrection and he told women to go and tell the others. He noticed the obscure, he valued those taken for granted, he loved all as those created in his image and intended for the purposes of his kingdom. **Christians, as people oriented towards Jesus and the ways of his kingdom, ought to be the strongest advocates of equality between men and women, and when women and girls are demeaned or oppressed because of their sex, Christians should be the first to speak up and stand up.**

Does it mean that suddenly we will change the world? Probably not, at least not yet. Just before the end of World War II, a Jesuit priest named Alfred Delp was executed on false charges connected with the plot to kill Adolf Hitler. Delp did participate, however, in the resistance movement against Hitler, and his writings from the terrible experience of spending years in a Nazi prison may inspire us in this Advent season in whatever difficult days we may find ourselves.

Advent is the time of promise, he wrote; it is not yet the time of fulfillment.

We are still in the midst of everything and in the logical inexorability and relentlessness of destiny. Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, the shouts of self-assurance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness. **But round about the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on them already the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come. From afar sound the first notes as of pipes and voices, not yet discernable as a song or melody. It is all far off still, and only just announced and foretold. But it is happening, today.**³

It is happening today, the promise of this peaceable kingdom, this radiant fulfillment to come, it is happening today. And our response to it begins with repentance, a turning, a re-orientation to the center, to Jesus and the ways of his kingdom.

This Advent, what might we imagine if we could be wholly turned toward God, for us and for our world? And how would we need to live to make that real?

And to God be the glory, now and forever, Amen.

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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³ Alfred Delp, *Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings, 1941-1944*