

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

December 4, 2022

Second Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

ADVENT GPS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A month ago, I made plans to eat lunch with a friend who lives at Ocean Isle Beach. He was going to be in a meeting at the Cape Fear Presbyterian Church on Shipyard Boulevard in Wilmington, so he asked me to find a sandwich place near the church. I suggested P.T.'s Old Fashioned Grille on S. 17th Street. I asked Siri to give me directions and she took me down College Road to turn right on Shipyard, then another right on S. 17th, to head west toward the hospital. I thought P.T.'s would be on the right-hand side of the road, but I never saw it and wound up in front of New Hanover Hospital. Siri said, "At the light, make a U-turn." I got more and more confused as I headed back east, because I still didn't see P.T.'s sign. Turns out the grille is tucked away in a little row of shops behind some trees and bushes. Siri took me back through a neighborhood and then told me to turn into a shopping center. Once I got in the parking lot (still not seeing the grille), Siri went wild: "Turn right. Turn left. Recalculating. Turn right. Turn left. Make a U-turn. Recalculating." I was just about to text my friend and say, "I can't find P.T.'s" when I glimpsed the restaurant through the trees and saw John standing out front, waiting for me.

"Recalculating! At the River Jordan, make a U-turn and head in the opposite direction!" That's basically the message John the Baptist preached when he appeared in the wilderness of Judea and proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:2) Which, by the way, is the same message Jesus proclaimed as he began his public ministry, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 4:17)

This story about John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness is traditionally read on the second Sunday of Advent. In fact, John has been called "the patron of Advent" and "the patron saint of repentance." In a sense, John was the "advance man" for Jesus – the person who visited the location of Judea by the Jordan River before the arrival of the important visitor ("the one who is more powerful than I, of whom I am not worthy to carry his sandals") to make the appropriate arrangements. In this case, making the appropriate arrangements meant proclaiming a message of repentance.

Today's sermon title – "Advent GPS" – was inspired by an article by Raymond R. Roberts about John's message of repentance. He wrote, "John reminds us that Advent is a season to invite people to choose their direction and destination. It is the season to ask: 'Where are you?' and 'Where are you going?' It is a time to ask: 'How is God's reign drawing near and even now lying dormant in unrealized possibilities around you?' and

‘What will it take for you to participate in God’s kingdom?’ It is a time to call people to repentance because the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”¹

It seems that the idea of “repentance” has been replaced with self-help books or equated with New Year’s resolutions or just feeling sorry when you’ve done something wrong (or are you just sorry you got found out?). A dictionary definition of “repent” is “to feel regret or contrition for some particular act or deed.” Maybe a call to repentance conjures up memories of tent revivals and fire and brimstone preachers.

Here’s another, and interesting, dictionary definition (and it’s not a Bible dictionary): “to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one’s life.” That describes well John’s message out there in the Judean wilderness as he got people ready for the coming of the Messiah. The root of the word “repent” literally means “to turn – to have a dramatic change of mind and direction. To “recalculate,” if you will. That’s the same message we heard all through the fall from the apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul talked about “repentance” in terms of living by the Spirit and being guided by the Spirit, rather than “living in the flesh.” Two life orientations – one focused on yourself and guided by your own desires and self-interest, one focused on God and guided by God’s will and purposes for your life.

In his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, Frederick Buechner describes what it means to repent this way: “To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ than to the future and saying, ‘Wow!’”² Certainly our repentance must look to our past, for we all have many things for which to repent. But, just as Advent looks to the past to give us hope for the future and encouragement for the present, so our true repentance can turn us in a new direction now even as we await the promised coming of Jesus Christ as Judge, Redeemer, and Savior.

That’s probably why John told the Pharisees and Sadducees, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance” and then warned against trees that don’t bear fruit. In Luke’s version of this story, the people in the crowd by the Jordan River responded to John’s repentance preaching by asking, “What then should we do?” John gave them very specific suggestions about how to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” – if you have two coats and someone needs a coat, share one of yours; if you have food and someone else doesn’t, share your food; if you’re a tax collector, don’t collect more than you’re supposed to; if you’re a soldier, don’t extort money from people by threatening them or falsely accusing them. John’s instructions suggest that acting like that going forward must have been a recalculation of where their lives were headed.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is a Presbyterian minister who serves as co-pastor with her husband of the First Presbyterian Union Church in Owego, New York. She is also a prolific hymn writer, having written over 400 hymns, many with new words for familiar hymn tunes. She wrote a hymn for the second Sunday of Advent called “Did Your Parents Pray at Table?” to be sung to the tune of “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” As I read the words, think about how this Advent call to repentance in the

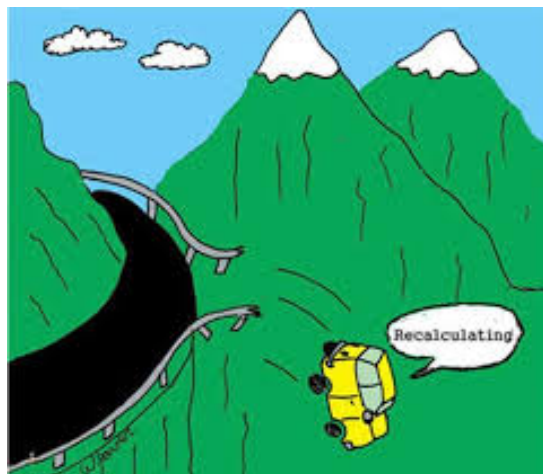
story about John the Baptist is a call to live each and every day in a manner worthy of our Lord's coming again.

*Did your parents pray at table? Did your aunt serve Jesus well?
Did your grandpa preach the gospel? Is your grandma serving still?
This is not your folks' religion! God is calling you, yourself!
You must make your own decision – take your own faith off the shelf.*

*What's the fruit of your repentance? Are you willing to be changed?
Has the gospel made a difference? Is your life now rearranged?
Have you changed more than a smidgen –
till the world now thinks you're odd?
Does your day-to-day religion show the peaceful reign of God?*

*Do you trust in God's abundance – not in hatred, pride and fear?
Is the love of Christ your compass as you welcome strangers here?
Do you work to end the violence, and to share and share some more?
Are you humble, peaceful, present to the outcast and the poor?*

*God, we point to those before us who have witnessed to your Way,
But you come to us and ask us, "How have you served me today?"
Make us faithful, bold and giving; may our love and joy abound.
In the work of daily living, may we turn our lives around.*



This is one of my favorite cartoons. The punchline is so obvious. If you've ever used a GPS, you must have heard the voice say, "Recalculating." Sometimes it can be very irritating and disruptive, but it's usually a voice you need to listen to and do something about. But isn't that cartoon a very good illustration of how our lives can get so far off track? John the Baptist may not have known anything about GPS and the science and technology behind it, but that cartoon and his wilderness message are good

illustrations of our need for repentance. Maybe today your life feels like that car careening off the mountainside. Maybe you feel like you're going in circles in a parking lot, knowing where you need to go but not quite sure how to get there. Maybe you're struggling with the feeling of "Is that all there is? The same old same old . . ." Maybe you long for a deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That's why we need to hear John's wilderness sermon with 21st century ears and take to heart the message, "Recalculate!" so we will know where we're going and how to get there.

As I have said before, Advent is a season in which we look back and look ahead and find out how to live right now. Here is a good story about the importance of being prepared (as we heard the apostle Paul say last week, "you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." Romans 13:11) while we wait for the promised return of Christ.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was one of the most famous and influential Jewish scholars in Judea in the first and second centuries A.D. He was known for being strict with his students. One day the rabbi taught his students, "Repent one day before your death." He didn't mean "one day" as in "one day in general." No, he meant "Repent on the day before the day you die." Naturally one of his students asked, "How will we know when that day is?" to which Rabbi Eliezer answered, "All the more reason to repent today, lest you die tomorrow."³

It's easy to get distracted in life and lose our way to God, especially in this busy time of preparing for Christmas. As I bring this sermon to a close, I want to share some thoughts from Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and writer about the Christian spiritual life. I first read these words a number of years ago, when my relationship with God felt like that car going off the side of the mountain. While Nouwen specifically writes about "worrying," his thoughts are a good description of how and why our relationship with God through Jesus Christ can get so off track: "Today worrying means to be occupied and preoccupied with many things, while at the same time being bored, resentful, depressed, and very lonely. I am not trying to say that all of us are worried in such an extreme way all the time. Yet there is little doubt in my mind that the experience of being filled yet unfulfilled touches most of us to some degree at some time. In our highly technological and competitive world, it is hard to avoid completely the forces that fill up our inner and outer space and disconnect us from our innermost selves, our fellow human beings, and our God. One of the most notable characteristics of worrying is that it fragments our lives. The many things to do, to think about, to plan for, the many people to remember to visit, or to talk with, the many causes to attack or defend, all these pull us apart and make us lose our center. Worrying causes us to be 'all over the place,' but seldom at home. One way to express the spiritual crisis of our time is to say that most of us have an address but cannot be found there."⁴

An Advent GPS – "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" -- is a reminder to bear good fruit in response to God's continual call and claim on our lives, during the Advent and Christmas seasons and all year round. An Advent GPS will help

us recalculate, be assured that “our destination is just ahead,” and we can be found at home with God.

Let us pray: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Raymond R. Roberts, “Matthew 3:1-12,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, October 2005, Volume 59, No. 4, p. 398.

²Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), p. 79.

³Alyce McKenzie, “Advice on How Not to Prepare: Reflections on Advent 2, Matthew 3:1-12,” December 2, 2013 at www.patheos.com.

⁴“Are You Home?” January 27, 2022 at www.henrinouwen.org.