

December 6, 2020

Second Sunday of Advent (B)

Repent!

Mark 1:1-8

**Opening Words:** This is the Second Sunday of Advent. We are directed by the lectionary to the opening words of the Gospel of Mark. The main character in our reading for today is John the Baptist. Many believe he was related to Jesus and believed in his ministry from the very beginning. The Gospel of Luke tells us his parents were Zechariah and Elizabeth. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tells us he was killed, decapitated, by King Herod. That story is incredibly sad. His entire life could be summed up in one word, repent! That is what we find in our Gospel reading for today, Mark 1:1-8. Let me call this message *Repent!* Let me warn you now. This message contains a healthy dose of basic Christian theology.

### **Mark 1:1-8**

- 1** The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,
- 2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" —
- 3** "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "
- 4** And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- 5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.
- 6** John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.
- 7** And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.
- 8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

We found ourselves in the first chapter of Mark. According to the text, the year is approximately 25 A.D., which makes John approximately 30 years old. He moved out of the city of Jerusalem and lived in the wilderness. Constantly on the move, he covers the country around the Jordan and delivers one message, repent! He wore clothes made from camel's hair and a leather belt, to underscore his message, like the prophets of old. He ate locust and honey, to underscore his message. He was a visual sign against self-indulgence. His ministry consumed his life. Yet, he also understood he was not the main character in God's plan of salvation for the world. There would be another one coming who was much greater. His name was Jesus. John told his generation to repent because Jesus was coming. Somethings do not change. Our generation should repent for the same reason. Did you know repentance is referred to 6,735 times in the Bible? Repentance is one of the major themes in the Bible.

Do you remember the story of Hosea? It is a story of repentance. He lived in the middle of the eighth century BC, during the tragic days of the end of the northern tribe. He was a prophet of God, who got an unusual assignment. He was told by God to go out and marry an adulterous woman. In other words, she was a prostitute. She sold her body to men for sex. Her name was Gomer. In time, Hosea and Gomer had three children in their marriage. The first was a boy, whose name means "God scatters." The second was a girl, whose name means "I will no longer love you." Their third child was a second boy, whose name means "I am not your God." Let me ask you three questions. Do you think those children liked their names? Why did God tell Hosea to marry a prostitute? Why did he have him name his children those names? Because, every day Hosea played the part of God, and every day Gomer played the part of Israel. God continued to love, and Gomer continued to be unfaithful. As the drama played out, God was confident that the people would get the message, but they did not. They failed to repent.

Do you remember the story of Jonah? It is a story of repentance. God told him to go to Nineveh. That was in the Middle East. The reluctant prophet does not want to go to Nineveh for one reason. He does not like them. He is afraid to go to Nineveh because the people might listen and repent. You know the story. Jonah runs in the opposite direction and heads toward Tarshish, Spain. This is the problem. You cannot run from God. In the end, he goes to Nineveh and his great fear happens. The people of that great city repent. The last time we saw Jonah, he was sitting under a tree having a pity party. Why is it we have such a hard time with mercy when the recipients are not like us? Repentance is not just found in the Bible. It is found in our world.

I was driving through downtown Youngstown, and someone told me I needed to repent. It was the day after the war in Iraq started. Everything was normal. The traffic was moving through the metropolis. The only thing abnormal about that day was a man standing in the middle of the divide. He was a wild un-groomed character holding a homemade sign. He yelled at me to read his sign. Written in large black print on a white poster board were these words: REPENT! THE END IS NEAR! Let us just be honest. There is nothing original about the topic of repentance. John was not the first and he was not the last to deliver that message. When was the last time someone told you, you need to repent? This is the problem.

Very few understand Biblical repentance. It is not just words, "Forgive me!" Repentance is an inward response. Genuine repentance pleads with God to forgive and deliver from the burden of sin and the fear of judgment and hell. It is seen in the story of the tax collector in Luke 18. Afraid to look toward heaven he beat his chest and cried, "*God be merciful to me, a sinner.*" Repentance is not just reformed behavior. True repentance involves a changed heart. It is illustrated in this old preaching story.

Rodney "Gipsy" Smith (1860-1947) was a British evangelist. He preached for over 70 years. In his book, *The Bible Friend*, tells the story of an experience he had in South Africa. According to the story, a Dutchman came to one of his services and was convicted of his sin. The next morning that same Dutchman got up and went to the home of an acquaintance, carrying an old watch. When the two met, he handed the old watch over and asked, "Do you recognize this?" "Why, yes," answered the other. "Those are my initials; that is my watch. I lost it eight years ago. How did you get it, and how long have you had it?" "I stole it," was the reply. "What made you bring it back now?" "I was converted last night," was the answer, "and I had to bring it back." There is nothing easy about true repentance. It is extremely difficult. Consider these three statements with me:

**It is easy to see the sins in others!** Her name is Sarah. She is not a member here. She has never worshipped here. However, she has both visited and called the church countless times. She is not the most attractive woman. She could lose a few pounds. She could wash her hair and her body. She smells like a cigarette, which explains why her breathing is labored. Her stories are always different, yet her story is the same. I have heard countless versions of her hardship stories through the years. She wants one thing, HELP! In other words, she wants money. The first time she came, she told me she did not have any money because she had just gotten out of the hospital. She had not eaten in several days. I was really touched by her story. No one should be hungry. I gave her some time. I gave her a gift certificate. I prayed with her and walked her to the door. I treated her with dignity and respect. Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. As we stood at the door, she thanked me one more time with a tear in her eyes. She was hungry. From the door I watched her walk toward her ancient SUV. I felt good I had helped someone. Then I looked inside of her vehicle. I was surprised to see other people. Maybe I should have given her a larger certificate? Maybe they were hungry too? However, do you know what surprised me the most? One of the people inside the van threw a bag out of the window from a fast-food restaurant. As Sarah drove off with my gift certificate, I went out to pick up the trash. They had run for the border. They were not hungry. There were half eaten tacos spread though out the parking lot. There is no other way to say it. Sarah had lied to me. They had been eating! One of them had order a volcano taco. I felt like a fool and I labeled her a sinner. I will never help her again because I feel like I am part of her problem. Sarah reminds me that it is easy to identify the sins of others. That leads us to statement number two.

**It is hard to identify yourself as a sinner!** John Lennon (1940-1980) died forty years ago this Tuesday. He was shot by Mark David Chapman (born 1955) on December 8, 1980. He was entering his apartment building, The Dakota, in New York City. When the news was announced a crowd of people assembled on that spot to remember him. Lennon was dead and Chapman was sent to Attica. He is still in prison today at the Wende Correctional Facility in Alden, New York. Though the years journalists have interviewed him. One of them asked Chapman what he regrets most

about the whole event. He responded, "I am saddened that people seem to misunderstand me. I am not a bad person. I only killed one person." How difficult it is to identify yourself as a sinner. Never forget, Romans 3:23, "*All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.*" That means you are a sinner. That leads us to statement number three. Here is the good news.

**God solved our sin problem!** Romans 6:23 begins, "*For the wages of sin is death.*" That means the sin in your life is damaging your relationship with God. In other words, you are dying spiritually. However, that is only the first half of that verse. Romans 6:23 ends, "*But the gift of God is eternal life through in Jesus Christ our Lord.*" In other words, the only way to have a relationship with God is through Jesus. And it all begins with repentance. In Biblical repentance everything changes, because your heart is changed. Billy Graham (1918-2018) once said, "*The wonderful news is that Lord is a God of mercy, and he responds to repentance.*"

When I was in school, I lived in a community near the seminary in Nicholasville, Kentucky. It is a good place to be from. I lived in an apartment that was not the best. I was always spraying for roaches and cleaning out the mouse traps. I only lived there for one reason. It was cheap. I was not the only student in that complex; there were others. I made some wonderful friends during that year. One of the blessings of that year was getting to know the apartment manager, Duke. He and his wife, Diana, were wonderful Christian people. Every Sunday night, they hosted us poor students for dinner. It was nothing exciting, just pizza, hot dogs, or hamburgers. The best part was listening to Duke's wild stories from his days as a shrimper in Florida. He was not afraid to share his faith. Duke loved to share his wild past with us innocent seminary students. Every story ended with a big laugh and Duke would say, "Forgive me, Jesus!"

One night, we asked Duke how he came to know Jesus? His story began like all his stories. It was late at night and he had been drinking too much. He and Diana had gotten into a big fight and he left mad. He jumped in his truck and started driving. He had his foot to the floor and almost fell asleep. Duke said out of nowhere, he heard a voice. He was alone, so he checked his radio. It was off, and he heard a voice again. He looked over to the passenger seat and there was Jesus, himself. The Master looked at him and said, "Duke, you are going to kill yourself. You have a good heart. Pull over and do something with your life." Duke said, "What else could I do? I pulled over. I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. And slept it off in the weeds." When he got home the next morning, he expected another ugly scene with Diana. Instead, she told him, Jesus had come to her too. The Master said, "You have a good heart. Do something with your life." She had accepted Jesus too! Duke ended the story with a big laugh and said, "Thank-you, Jesus!"

Why did Duke and Diana keep inviting seminary students every Sunday night? It was one way, of many ways, they thanked Jesus for saving their souls. What is your way? Do you remember the quote from Billy Graham? The great evangelist once said, "*The*

*wonderful news is that Lord is a God of mercy, and he responds to repentance.* "And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**