
**"Jesus' Advance Man"
Luke 3:1-20**

Several years ago my daughter called me one day and asked if I wanted to go to a Barry Manilow concert. You know who Barry is – the one who "writes the songs for all the world to sing." I was shocked to think that she would want to go to a concert with her old man. I was also surprised to think that a woman her age even liked Barry Manilow's music. I was not surprised that I ended up buying the tickets.

I was confused about the starting time. The tickets said 8:00. The newspaper said 7:30. We arrived in time for 7:30, just in case. An usher told us it didn't make any difference because the show would probably start 10-15 minutes late. It had the night before.

I didn't think anything of it at the time, but by 8:15 I was getting impatient. I was on time. Why wasn't he? Then I noticed the recorded music that had been playing softly when we arrived was getting louder. Some of the audience started a rhythmic clapping. Several female fans stood up as the clapping intensified and the music got louder. Then, suddenly, the house lights went out, the laser lights started dancing, and a spotlight focused precisely where Barry was standing.

The delay was obviously part of the show. It heightened the air of expectancy. Barry wasn't going to arrive until the crowd was ready to receive him.

Advent is a lot like that. It's a season of waiting. Jesus won't arrive until we are ready to receive him. We may get impatient waiting for Christmas, but the church calendar says we can't get to Christmas without going through Advent, a time of preparation. The Gospel writers won't let us come to Jesus either without going through John the Baptist. We meet the baptizer every year during Advent at least once, sometimes twice.

Most of our preparations for Christmas, however, are rather predictable. We do the same things every year, including reciting the familiar litany about how busy we are. The TV ads for jewelry and perfume are about the same. They still run the same Elizabeth Taylor ads for her perfume they've shown for years. She's 75-years-of-age but the pictures suggest she's not a day over 50! Even the TV news is the same--stories about seasonal depression and how much the twelve days of Christmas would cost us if we bought them with today's dollars.

Speaking of a partridge in the pear tree--a burglar broke into a jewelry store one night. As he approached the safe, he heard a voice. "God is watching you." He looked, but couldn't see anyone in the shadows. So he started more carefully toward the safe again. "God is watching you." This time he noticed a parrot sitting on its perch. "What's your name?" the burglar asked the parrot. "John the Baptist," the parrot replied. "Who ever named you that?" "My owner. The same one who named the rottweiler, 'God'."

That was John the Baptist's job description – to give the people fair warning. The Messiah is coming. So John proclaimed a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness

of sins." There is nothing benign in his message. It was a call for radical change and its setting was in real life. So it is for us today. Listen:

In the seventh year of the administration of George W. Bush, when Ed Rendell was governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania; when Arlan Specter and Robert Casey were United States Senators from Pennsylvania; and when Congresswoman Allyson Schwartz represented Montgomery County – the voice of one crying out in the wilderness says to us,

"Just because you're good Presbyterians, don't presume that you have no need for change in your life. Is anyone here who does not have crooked ways which need straightening? Is there anyone here who does not have holes of doubt and despondency which need filling? Is there anyone here who does not have mountains of stubbornness and pride which need leveling?

Who told you to nestle into your cushioned pews only to dream of white Christmases and the way things used to be? Who told you to come to church at your convenience, give God a tip and expect God to jump at your every beck and call? If God is God, then give him your whole life, not just part of it. When you leave this place, don't trample on anyone no matter what they've done to you. Treat everyone with respect and if something is worth doing, do it well. How can you come to the manger year after year without showing in specific ways that you want to lead a new life?

"You brood of vipers," thundered John's voice. Obviously John could never be a Presbyterian pastor! He's just not nice enough. He's all hell-fire and damnation. That may be welcome in some traditions, but not in ours, especially not two weeks before Christmas.

John's preaching is problematic in a way we may never have considered. **"A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...?"** I have a problem with that. How can I turn my life around (which is what repentance means) before I meet Jesus. If I could do that by myself, I wouldn't need him. My life can be turned around only after it is touched by his healing grace.

Barbara Brown Taylor offers a wonderful image to help us understand what repentance is all about.ⁱ

Repentance is turning toward the God who is forever turning toward us. Long before Elmer Gantry got hold of the word, it meant simply to turn around, to go another way. It had nothing to do with feeling guilty or sorry or afraid. Those are all stuck feelings, and the word for them is remorse, not repentance.

Remorse is what you do after you have driven into a major mud hole and your tires are spinning, digging deeper trenches every time they go around ... Remorse ... does not get you anywhere.

Repentance begins with the sure and certain knowledge that you are stuck, and that despite everything you have been telling yourself to the contrary, you do need help. [That help may come in the form of] a man in striped overalls walking toward you with a plank under his arm. When he leans through the window and offers to wedge it under your back wheels, repentance means having the good sense to say "thank you" instead of "no" or "not yet" and taking the man's advice to try putting the car in "reverse" instead of "drive." Repentance is what happens inside of you when he leans on the bumper and you feel the car begin to move, and keep on moving until you are back on the pavement again with shaky legs and a grateful heart, looking around for the kind stranger who has disappeared without a trace.

Repentance is not an achievement ... It is a gift – a gift God is pleased to give anyone with the good sense to say "thank you" instead of "no" or "not yet."

Repentance begins in the sure and certain knowledge that we need help. One of the symbols that we need help and cannot save ourselves is the concept of political correctness. Nothing is more politically correct these days than to ridicule those who try to be politically correct. That makes me uncomfortable. I, for one, think it's terribly important to use language that is sensitive to the needs and life circumstances of others. I think it's important to try to do things that lead to health and wholeness of life not only for people, but for all creation.

If only the politically correct just had more of a sense of humor and didn't take themselves so seriously. The problem is that no matter how hard we try, we cannot make the world correct. Our best intentions sometimes backfire. I remember reading some time ago about making curb cuts to allow wheel chairs to easily go across the street. Who could be against that? The blind, who trace their white canes along the curb for guidance, that's who.

We're stuck. When we fix this, we break that. No matter what we do, we spin our wheels and dig ourselves in deeper. We need help. We cannot save ourselves. John the Baptist tells us to put it in reverse and he pushes us back on to the pavement, the highway of our God. No, we don't repent *in order* to be forgiven. If we have to do something to earn forgiveness, not only are we faced with an impossibility, but forgiveness ceases to be forgiveness. Until we repent, however, we cannot see the one who has come with forgiveness and who will come again to restore all of creation to its intended purpose. When we repent, we see where we want to go and we are better able to bear fruits that befit repentance.

There is a medieval legend about a man who was decadent and irresponsible in many ways but who had enough grace in him to want to be good. He went to a costume maker who gave him a costume to wear – complete with a halo wired to his head. As the man walked down the street he was tempted to act and react in his normal, shiftless way – but then he remembered the halo on his head. So he decided to act differently: He gave money to a beggar on the street. He treated his wife well. He refused to cut corners at work. Eventually he returned the halo costume – but as he was leaving the costume shop he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and he saw a permanent halo glowing above his head! It seems that he had become what he did

– the halo was a gift of God’s forgiving love which enabled his repentance, which brought about a transformation in his life. Yes, by turning around and beginning to behave in a new way – this man found a permanent new direction for his life. ⁱⁱ

That halo for us is our baptism. To remind ourselves daily that we are baptized is an act of repentance – to “turn [again] to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love.”ⁱⁱⁱ The more we do that, the brighter the lights will become and the sooner the show will begin.

-
- i. "Not Clean But Washable", sermon from SERMON MALL on the Internet.
 - ii. Told by Thomas Troeger
 - iii. One of the questions from the baptismal service, Book of Common Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)