

Advent 2-December 4, 2022
Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

Last year, on the afternoon of Halloween, I found myself in the candy aisle at CVS, my procrastination finally getting the best of me, as I searched desperately for Halloween candy to give out that night. Instead of finding discount Reeses and Kit-Kats, as I hoped, the store had already been transformed into a Christmas wonderland. My options at that point were bleak-and we ended up giving out different flavors of Candy Canes that night. Although I was embarrassed, people delighted in receiving something different - Candy Canes, many remarked, **how fun**, we've never gotten them on Halloween before! Trick or treaters went away happy, my daughters found it hilarious, and I was reminded of just how eager we are for the holiday season to begin. // Outside all signs point to Christmas already being here. Our trees are decorated, wreaths have been hung since before Thanksgiving on the streets, and everywhere we look there are adornments, activities, and foods to help us get in the spirit. And with so much uncertainty and loss over the last few years, this holiday season feels even more welcome, with the long awaited return to familiar traditions giving us hope and comfort.

We want to dwell in this place-of good cheer, of warmth, of wonder and excitement, of celebration for the certainty of God's coming. But Advent is a strange season. It is all of these things-excitement and wonder for sure, but it is also a time of restraint, penitence, and reflection. As you know, the liturgical color of Advent is purple, the same color as Lent, and purple signifies an attitude of sorrow and repentance for sin. For some, particularly in Catholic circles, Advent is known as "A Little Lent"-I'd never heard that term before-and it also used to last for forty days, before it was formalized into four weeks in the 9th Century. The connection between Advent and Lent is intentional because they are both seasons of preparation and penitence, and their rhythm is designed to slow us down and help us turn inward. And although we anticipate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem with joy, we do so already knowing the full arc of Jesus' story-that this same precious baby Mary welcomed and nursed in her arms will be the same adult who is crucified on Golgotha. Especially now, in Advent, when the world demands our attention and draws us outward-into festivities, celebration, shopping and the oversaturation of all of our senses, God invites us to find moments of quiet reflection in the midst of this full and bright time.

This invitation to pause invites us to contemplate the full meaning of Jesus' coming-acknowledging the spectrum of joy and sorrow it will bring. And I can think of no better person than John the Baptist to invite us to spend this time of preparation differently than the world around us does. John, who's covered in camels hair and leather, who dines on locusts and honey as he travels around the wilderness proclaiming for all to hear, "**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is near." We get a taste of the counter cultural, prophetic nature of Jesus' ministry to come through John, who has no fear in calling out powerful religious leaders like the Pharisees and the Sadducees: "You brood of vipers," he hisses, "**Who** warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance." John's words, and his delivery-my goodness-they are so direct, uncomfortable, and accusatory that they almost make me cringe. But the medium and the message go hand in hand in the Gospel. Jesus is no ordinary, domesticated Savior interested in the status quo. The Gospel won't be palatable for those who are too comfortable in their holiness or too unwilling to change. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."// John continues to paint a picture of Jesus baptizing with fire and the Holy Spirit. It's clear that there is drastic change to come: all life will be transformed through Jesus. God is doing something completely new. Although John's words are damning, the message is invitational-and it means liberation for all of us, not just for a few.

According to John, repentance is the first step we must take to join Jesus in discipleship. Repenting means "to turn" or to have a dramatic

change of mind and direction. In Spanish, the verb for repent “arrepentir” also means to regret or to be sorry. This practice involves honestly examining the past and committing to begin anew, transforming our actions into alignment with the values of the Kingdom of God. As a community of faith, we are called to practice both individual and communal repentance.

Individually we’re called to repent with honesty and courage. I imagine a lot of us, myself included, struggle with this. Pride, stubbornness, shame, and busyness often prevent us from ever starting. Examining our harmful actions and feelings is messy, uncomfortable and it doesn’t make us feel good about ourselves. It requires vulnerability to dismantle the myths around who we are and what we are and aren’t capable of. In fact-we probably fall somewhere on the spectrum of either being far too aware of our imperfections to total avoidance of our failings and on any given day, we might relate to both. But repentance requires a faithfulness that trusts that God’s love is big enough for all of us, no matter who we are and what we have done.

You wouldn’t even understand: “Try me,” says God. If only people knew what I was really like: “Try me,” says God. It’s unforgivable what I’ve done: “Try me,” says God. God calls us to repent truthfully, acknowledging the real harm we have done and genuinely committing to do better. At the

same time we repent confidently, knowing that we are forgiven sinners, the emphasis being on forgiven.

What we do with this knowledge is up to us—we can avoid confronting it and live in denial, careful not to let a crack rupture the facade, it can overwhelm and cripple us, or it can liberate us to live a new life, one of active gratitude that no longer feels any need to pretend.

When we confess our sins communally, as members of a congregation, we are reminded of a few things: first, were we only to repent in isolation, we might be inclined to think of sin as primarily personal. But harm is also caused societally and organizationally, sometimes consciously and other times in the ways we simply absorb and adopt the values of the culture in which we live even in the Church. To repent then is also to *turn away* from values and practices of the world, like idolatry, violence, injustice, exploitation, or scarcity and to turn *towards* the values and practices of the kingdom of God, like abundance, justice, generosity, love and peace. Another thing communal repentance reminds us is that we have companions for this journey: we are not alone on this unconventional path. Those baptismal vows we make—to nurture and encourage, challenge, love and teach, are not just for precious children and babies like Emma Grace who we baptized last week—they are lifelong commitments we make—to show up and be the church **for and with** each other— in times of celebration and wonder, but also when life is hard, lonely, and full of shame or grief. When we bring our full selves to this community of faith and acknowledge our brokenness together, we weave the kind of brave

community that can live out the Gospel in authentic, tangible ways not just here, but out there in the world.

In Matthew, John speaks of baptism as a cleansing, a rebirth, an opportunity to repent and leave an old life or habits behind and be born again with a new identity. Repentance moves us forward by building up new practices and communities that shape our world towards more compassion, interdependence and love. As disciples, we are called to repent and bear fruit worthy of the Kingdom of God and it is a choice we are invited to make every single day, but especially in this time of Advent. I know from my limited experience with this congregation that there are already countless signs of such fruit here-in the way you feed your neighbors at the Georgetown Saturday Supper, in the joy I see in the children's faces after Children's Church, in the way you glorify God through song, in the way you organize a Meal Train for a member in need, in the Sunday morning prayer group, in your curiosity and hunger for learning, in faithful committee meetings, and so much more. May we use this season of Advent wisely and intentionally, reflecting and repenting so that we may prepare our hearts and our communities to welcome Jesus with wonder and joy, eager to join him in building the Kingdom of God here in this place. Amen.

Friends, the time is drawing near. Let us prepare ourselves to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Here we give thanks that we are people

who are being transformed! From here, we go into a world that is being transformed.

Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord. Amen