

“Repent? Who, Me?”

Isaiah 40:1-5; Matthew 3:1-12

The Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2016

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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In a “Peanuts” cartoon, Lucy comes to Charlie Brown saying “Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown. Since it’s this time of the season, I think we ought to bury past differences and try to be kind.” Charlie Brown asks, “Why does it just have to be this time of the season? Why can’t it be all year long?” Lucy looks at him and exclaims, “What are you, some kind of fanatic?”

Today’s Gospel is fanatical. No respecter of persons, John the Baptist called the religious people “snakes” and exhorts them to repent. To prepare for Messiah, everyone is called to repent: no exceptions.

To repent (Greek: “metanoia”) is literally “to turn” away from one thing and toward another: away from hurt and brokenness and toward healing and wholeness. It implies a change of heart, the kind of permanent life change that might, in fact, get us labeled a fanatic.

From what shall we turn away in Advent? Toward what?

Before we address those questions, we need to be honest in our resistance to the whole idea of repentance. “Repent? Who, Me?” is what we think, even if we don’t say it. We are like the parishioner who once told me “I don’t pray the unison prayers of confession because I don’t do those things that are mentioned.” Really? Really. **None** of them? Ever? Uh-huh.

Or perhaps we associate repentance with remorse, whether real or acted-out, a kind of breast-beating that is a dismal spiritual relic of the past. Besides, we’re basically good people. Remembering our mistakes is just negativity that brings us down. Our response is a bit like the Rev. James W.

Moore's preaching series on the Peabody Award-winning radio broadcast "The Protestant Hour," later published as a book: Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses.

On closer inspection, we're more like Lucy than we want to admit. Being a church member is all right, but let's not get fanatical. Let's not get too serious about discipleship. Besides, who wants to change?

Back to Lucy and Charlie Brown. Lucy is chasing Charlie Brown: "I'll get you, Charlie Brown! I'll get you! I'll knock your block off!" Charlie Brown, running away at full speed, stops, turns around and says "Wait a minute!" Hold everything! We can't carry on like this! We have no right to act this way...the world is filled with problems...people hurting other people...people not understanding other people...now, if we as children can't solve what are relatively minor problems, how can we ever expect to....."

POW!!! Lucy hits Charlie Brown with a left to the jaw, knocking him out. She says "I had to hit him QUICK! He was beginning to make sense!"

If this is beginning to make sense to you as it does to me, then we return to the questions "From what are we going to turn this Advent? And towards what?"

Things to omit - lying (or cleverly manipulating the truth), slander or other gossip, judging the behavior of another without knowing their circumstance, escaping life by abuses of substance or abuses of relationship - are abbreviations of a longer list of transgressions obvious to most people.

Yet while habits and attitudes are a place to start, they are symptoms, not causes. The root cause is attachment solely to ourselves. Advent calls us to turn away from preoccupation with self, reliance wholly upon self, life totally absorbed with

self. This is not a spiritual shaking-of-the-finger and wagging-of-the-head. It is rather noting that destructive behaviors are extension of our fears: of insecurity, vulnerability, of having the discrepancy between our public and private lives exposed. Hurtful behavior is often a symptom of a hurting, fearful heart that hurts more, not less, when we try to “go it alone.”

Toward what then are we to turn? News flash: God! But wait: not God the sentimental grandfather who smiles benignly and never speaks an ill word. John the Baptizer was right: it's not enough to say “we have Abraham as our father.” That is, that we're good, or good enough, or have several excellent excuses if we're not, or that we have a lineage of many generations in this church or in this community. God can raise up from stones children of Abraham, whether the century is the first or the twenty-first.

So turning toward God is about faithfulness to God before faithfulness to self. If we believe, as we are later taught in the ministry of Jesus, that the core of our faith is loving God and loving neighbor, then this outward focus on relationships—with God and neighbor—is on trust, respect and love. When we seek relationships and base our behavior on these, the good will come. Then the words of the prophet Isaiah are no longer words to placate us, they become words of truth:

“Comfort my people,” says our God. “Encourage the people...tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are forgiven.”

This promise is true. When we believe it, we WANT to change, we WANT to turn toward this God who invites us to start anew, we WANT to prepare in the wilderness a highway for our God. And the promise has been sealed by the sacrifice of Christ, perfect and sufficient for all our sins. Repent? Yes, you. And me. Amen.