

Sermon: December 1, 2019- Season of Advent- Sunday of Hope

Let us pray, gracious Lord we offer you our thanks and praise for the beauty of this day and the ability that we have to gather together in your grace and love, with these the members of our faith community. Having received your grace in the food of your table at the beginning of this season of Advent, I now offer you in response the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts, and may they be acceptable unto you our redeemer. Amen.

This past week I was taking with a friend of mine who is not a minister, but who is very involved in her church. She was scheduled to read scripture this first Sunday of Advent and she called to lament to me about having to begin Advent each year, not with a wonderful story of a miracle, or an angel visit, but with what appears to be a grumpy prophet in the desert? I had never thought of John the Baptist as a grumpy prophet, but I must admit that each year as we begin this wonderful season of Advent, I ponder whether we should begin with words, like the ones we heard today or not. Because often they don't fit with how we feel in this time.

When Advent begins, particularly when it begins, as is the case this year, in the first week of December, most of us are already in the full swing of Christmas and when we come to church, we (Like Camryn has been begging for months,) we want to hear about the Christmas story we love so dearly, not some apocalyptic rant. My friend's questions of me echoed questions I have heard many times before and even asked myself, "Why when we want hear about Jesus, do we hear about John the Baptist? Why when we want to hear about the beauty of the Christ child bathed in Holy light, do we hear about a prophet who wore camel's hair clothing and ate locusts? Why when we want to hear the proclamation of the Angels, "For unto you a babe is born," do we begin every Advent season hearing from some guy in the desert who always seems to be shouting, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near?" But most important of the questions, at least for us today, is "what does John's call to repent, have to do with Advent's hope?"

The word repent, is not a word that we hear outside of the church very often. But when we do hear it, we equate it to mean, to be sorry for something. To repent, we have decided, is to claim ones wrong doing. But the way John uses it in our reading today, it doesn't make sense to think of repenting in those ways. John says, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near." John is not asking us to say sorry in order for the kingdoms to come near; its not a reward for it was John would have said, "Repent and the kingdom of God will come near." John is also not using the call to repent as a threat, for he doesn't say "Repent, or the Kingdom of God will come near." No what John says is, "Repent for the Kingdom of God has come near." What it suggests, is that its already here, the Kingdom is already among us and whether we think we did or not, we had nothing to do with the kingdom's arrival. This was God's plan, not

ours, and nothing we could do or didn't do would stop it from coming or make it come sooner, the Kingdom is here John says, so repent."

If I take the word repent to mean to apologize, then in this context, when John says "repent for the Kingdom of God has come near," what exactly am I apologizing for? Primed with that pondering I did little research this week, and it turns out that defining repent as saying sorry is actually quite biblically incorrect. Repenting has less to do with claiming our wrongdoing and more to do with changing one's mindset. Many different biblical scholars use other words to describe this by saying that to repent is to re-orient oneself. To centre oneself. To re-order how we do things. But I am a child of the eighties and so what makes the most sense to me is that to repent, is effectively to hit the restart button.

Some of you may know the original Nintendo system. The system was pretty cool for the time, but compared to gaming systems today it is the equivalent of cave drawings. The Nintendo had two buttons on the front of the console a power button and restart button. Quite often a game would scramble or freeze and hitting the power button often didn't do anything; when the power went off and then came back on something about the game would still not work. However, if you hit the restart button, everything would unscramble and go back to normal. It was as if that button had the power to make everything good again. You may lose your saves and have to start over again, but you did so with a fresh perspective.

Maybe you can see where I am going with this. On this first Sunday of the Advent season, "Restart," John says, "For the Kingdom of God has come near." Heard in that way John words don't sound apocalyptic at all. Instead they begin to sound hopeful. They offer us a chance to hit that restart button and to change how we are viewing or experiencing the world around us and the lives we are living.

And there may not be another time of year when that is more important for all of us than today, December 1st, the first Sunday of Advent. As I already said many of us are weeks ahead in our minds. I know I am; I have already been working on the bulletins for all the Sunday of Advent and have been pondering the blue Christmas service and Christmas Eve. For weeks, in the church, we have been arranging musicians, extra events, even discussing what will happen in church after Christmas. And that's just the church. All around us the sights and smells of Christmas are in full bloom. Some radio stations have had 24/7 Christmas carols for weeks already, the stores are getting low of supplies and many businesses and work places have already had their Christmas parties.

The reality is I believe, that even though much of this season is good and wonderful, we move so fast and so earlier through it all that we often don't even enjoy it; it becomes just a season to get through. I will never forget the words of a one woman in the charge where I worked as student. I happened to notice that for most of November she was quite busy, getting

ready for Christmas. In Advent that year, after church one Sunday I asked her, "Are you ready?" She replied by saying, "Ready for Christmas, eesh, I will be lucky if I survive it."

"Restart" John the Baptist says, "For the Kingdom of God has come near." Christmas is more than just a season of joy. Christmas reminds us that God, through Jesus, entered into this world, into human form. Walked these roads, faced conflict, joy, sorrow and hope. Two thousand plus years later, we still mark that moment, still hold it up as important to who we are. We should do more than just survive it. We should be changed by it.

Which is why we have four weeks of preparation. Four weeks to remind us of the gifts that God's Kingdom which is near, offers. Four weeks to reflect on hope, peace, joy and love. Four weeks to figure out how to hit that restart button on our lives, so that we don't miss the true joy in the midst of how busy we are, so that we fail to feel the peace in our hurry, so that we do more than survive the season, but rather are inspired by it. When we hit that restart button at beginning of this season, as that maybe not so grumpy prophet suggests, then the day comes when we read the story of Christ's birth, we will be able to hear it anew, almost like it was for the first time and we will begin to understand the significance that it offered in the past, in our present and in future.

What does John's call for repentance really have to do with hope? To repent, to restart, means that that we are willing to enter the season with hope that God is at work in our lives and that we want to not just see it, but allow that work to change life itself.

"Restart" John says, "For the Kingdom of God has come near." And thanks be to God for that. Amen.