

2nd Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." '

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Tricia and I recently purchased a Roomba. If you aren't aware of this beautiful device of human technological achievement, a Roomba is a fully automatic robot vacuum cleaner. It looks a little bit like little black saucer that hums its way around your house, sucking up dirt, debris and, in our case, cat litter that strays from the litter box and little bits of Elsie's dog food that she very rudely leaves lying around the house. When we first got the Roomba last week, we (and the pets) were fascinated, watching it go to and fro around the carpet and tiles of our house.

It's a little humorous at first. It goes until it gently bumps up against a wall or piece of furniture, or Elsie's tail (which she doesn't appreciate) and then rotates and begins in another direction...until it finds another obstacle, and then it rotates, finds a new direction, and then proceeds sucking up all the dust and debris that it can find.

You're probably wondering, "Pastor Stephen, why are we talking about your Roomba?"

Well, I'm glad you asked!

I think that's a little bit like repentance: going in a direction until we find an unhealthy obstacle, and then we literally turn into a different direction. As a matter of fact, the word for repentance in the Hebrew language literally means "to turn."

Now, I realize that for some of us, the word repentance comes with a lot of baggage. Some of us, especially those of us who were not brought up in a Presbyterian church, grew up in churches where the topic of repentance was steeped in guilt and shame. And most of the time, that guilt and shame was not directed toward what we *should* do but simply stopped at what we *shouldn't do*. Like, "don't have sexual urges," "don't have sex outside of marriage," and "don't be gay." Notice how most of these "don'ts" revolve around human sexuality. And the flip side of this argument is that if you didn't repent of your sin, you would burn in hell.

Well, here in the Presbyterian Church we take a slightly less "hellfire and brimstone" definition of repentance. Now don't get me wrong, we take repentance just as seriously. But we take it a little bit differently. In fact, I'd like to make the following case: if repentance is nothing more than turning from an unhealthy direction to a healthier direction, a direction that better reflects God's intention for our lives, then, simply put, repentance is the beginning of joy.

Now, I understand that this may be a little weird to think of as we listen to John the Baptist yelling in the wilderness, calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers. But I think sometimes storytellers use extreme language to get our attention to make sure we're aware that what they're talking about is really important.

For example (and this is a true story), I was probably about 6 or 7 years old and my mother was trying to get me to help her with the dishes. I was being a typical 6 or 7 year old and was not wanting to cooperate. So, my mother, with a playful smirk on her face, turned to me and said, "Stephen, you better help me with the dishes or you'll sleep in the dog house tonight!" As she turned back to the sink, I moved over to the kitchen door to look out in our carport at our dog's house. It was a chilly winter night and I sure as heck did not want to spend it out in the cold dog house. Being a 6 or 7 year old without the ability to understand the nuance of my mother's comment, I began to cry. My mother asked me what was wrong and, between sobs, I told her "Mom, I don't want to sleep in the dog house!" Immediately, my mother comforted me and told me that she wasn't actually going to make me sleep in the dog house that night and that she just said that to tell me how important it was that I helped her with the dishes. As I nodded my head and wiped my nose with the sleeve of my shirt, I then started to help my mom with the dishes.

I don't believe that we are a brood of vipers. I do, however, believe that what John is telling us is *really* important. It's really important because repentance can't wait as we anticipate the coming of the Christ-child. Repentance is the beginning of joy because there are so many parts of our lives both as individuals and as a community where we are not heading in the right direction and it is inevitable, like my Roomba, that we're heading for a collision.

So, this day, I ask that you think of repentance not as something that you need to do in order avoid going to hell. Don't think of repentance as meaning you have to repress the gift of your sexuality. Don't think of repentance as something that you need to do to deserve love, from God or anyone else. Rather, embrace repentance as a necessary step to finding joy; joy for yourself, joy for those you love, and joy for the community in which you are a part.

Think of repentance as practicing the pause to ask yourself the following question: “Is there a better direction I could take in order to increase the joy of the relationship I have with myself and my neighbor?”

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**