

Preparing for transformation

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When John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness calling out to all who would hear, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” it was done with great spirit and energy. This was not a proclamation meant cause people to feel nervous or fearful of the coming Messiah, but a profound truth meant to be shouted directly into the hearts and heads of all who would listen: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” This is good news! The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Saving One. And all those who heard back then, and all of us who hear these words of John still today, we say, “How? How shall we prepare?” And John calls out to us, “Repent!” And we say... “Oh.” When we think of preparing we don’t usually think of something so... abstract. Preparation, especially in this season of Advent, in this time when Christmas is coming nearer, tends to mean buying gifts, decorating our homes, baking goodies, getting special food and drink, setting up plans to meet with people—online, of course. Even when we think of preparation outside of this season, our minds tend to wander first to physical preparations—are all the physical things we need arranged and in order? And then perhaps we move to mental preparations—have we studied enough? Are we mentally ready to face what’s coming? Have we thought all the elements through? And then, maybe, we move to spiritual preparation—have we aligned ourselves with the way of Christ? Have we turned ourselves toward God? Have we repented?

Repent is one of those old words that we don’t really use these days. I certainly don’t tend to use the word repent in my everyday vernacular. It’s a faith-based term that we hear more in situations like worship, or Bible study; not in everyday conversations with friends or family or coworkers. And part of that certainly has to do with living in a very secular society where words like “repent” are no longer in vogue or even understood in a theological or Biblical sense. But it’s the word that John the Baptist uses when he calls us to prepare for Jesus—prepare through repentance. So what does it mean to repent? And why does it have anything to do with preparing for Jesus?

I had a conversation recently with a past summer camp staff member of mine. I mentioned that I’d be focusing on John the Baptist telling us to repent this Sunday, and their immediate response was a rather emphatic “Ugh.” And you know what? I get it. In this season where we place all this focus on positive words like hope, peace, joy, and love; where we think to birth and rebirth; where we sing songs of exaltation; throwing the word “repent” in the mix can feel like a bit of a downer. But it all depends on how you interpret that word.

A child-like understanding of repentance might be “feeling sorry for what you’ve done wrong and deciding to make better choices for the future.” Sometimes we throw in another of those faith-based terms: sin—knowing that you’ve sinned, or turned away from God, and now ask for God’s forgiveness. But repentance is more nuanced than just that. It is a word that means to change our perceptions; to change the way we see things; to turn around and face those we’ve hurt—those who are marked as “other”—

and reconcile. It means we face the truth about ourselves and our society and change directions. So, when John calls us to hear the good news, but then follows that with a call to repent and confess, it can feel less like the promised “good news” and more like, well, a lot of work. Because who really wants to face the truth about themselves and society and try to change directions, try to turn toward God, when there are Christmas cookies to bake and strings of lights glittering in our eyes? Good news can sometimes sound like bad news, at least at first. While the saying may be that “good news comes to those who wait”, the catch is that the waiting can’t be passive. We are not called to wait passively; we are called to prepare actively. We are called to repent.

And this isn’t a lament or an apology, but an opportunity to use our faith to see life in a new way, to recognize that the reign of God is at hand, to see that life in the world to come has already begun. Repentance is transformation.

So, how do we do this? How do we change our perceptions? How do we change our hearts and minds? When we observe our scripture, we see that John impels us to look back. We see John the Baptist, coming out of the wilderness in his camel hair clothes and eating locusts and honey and calling out the words from the prophet Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight”; and reminding us of the words from the prophet Malachi: “see I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.” Between his words and his dress and his diet, we have a picture of John the Baptist even those hearing Mark’s gospel in year 70CE would have seen as a throw back to an older time. It is a picture that makes John’s listeners realize that “any movement forward will first require a retrospective look back, both to our own personal histories and to the salvation history of God’s people.”¹

Now, what we need to be careful of here is that we don’t interpret “looking back” as nostalgia. Because if there’s one thing we will probably rely on a fair bit this Christmas, it’s nostalgia, and nostalgia is a far easier thing to embrace than repentance. It is far easier to look back and say “remember when we gathered along the street to watch the Santa Claus parade? Remember all the singing we did at our neighbours’ holiday party? Remember how we took turns lighting the Advent candles at church? And gathered all together to worship on Christmas Eve with candles and Silent Night? We will certainly lament the loss of many traditions that we hold dear during this season. But we are being called, not to nostalgia, but to prepare the way; to change the way we see things.

This task isn’t easy. We are reluctant to embrace John’s call for repentance and confession and looking back in order to then look forward, with Christ more clearly in view. We are reluctant to look back for so many reasons. Because 2020 has been crazy and so many things are off kilter already, so it may seem like now is not the time to think back on our personal histories or on the broken systems in our world. Maybe next year.

We are reluctant to heed John’s call because we go about our daily lives and we feel good about what we’re doing. We feel good about the choices we’re making. We feel

¹ Martin B. Copenhaver

good about how much time we give and donations we give and so what is there possibly to look back to?

We are reluctant to turn around because talking about repentance—about things we may be doing wrong or that we can improve upon or that we should change in our daily habits—is just stuff that we in our society today don't feel comfortable talking about. We don't want to offend. So we avoid.

But most of all, we are reluctant to repent because it takes work and it takes great faith. It's all too easy to sit back and wait. To just wait without being awake. To just wait passively. But transformation requires active preparation. It requires that we ask good questions of ourselves. It requires change and letting go in order to embrace God's forgiveness and look forward with love.

Each Sunday as part of our worship we repent; in our prayer of confession we name the ways that we have turned away from God. And not just each of us individually, but collectively, as a people living in the systems we do today. Our repentance isn't just for ourselves personally, it is for the ways that we live as a society. We may not be able to change all those societal problems, but when we name them aloud, we recognize their part in this theatre of life—we recognize certain systems and laws as stage directions that are limiting our movements and feeding our understanding of what "should" be done. But there is room to improvise! And this is what John tells us we can do—repent! Change your perceptions. Ignore the old worn out stage directions and do some improvising. Who knows where it could lead! It requires vulnerability on our part, and that makes it scary. But that vulnerability—that willingness to change our hearts and minds and allow ourselves to let go of old ways of life, old burdens and wrongs, and know we are forgiven and loved—that is what makes us more ready to hear and believe that Jesus can bring us new life. There is transformation. As we are changed by our own faith, by our own acceptance and understanding that we have a part in God's kingdom, then we become more prepared to see that new life.

Repentance isn't just an Advent theme. It's an all-the-time, everyday life in faith theme. Though it makes sense to talk about preparing for Jesus at this time of year, we don't prepare for Christ just at Christmastime. We are to prepare for his coming always. Through repentance. Through forgiveness. Through slow but constant transformation. And that may seem like a lot of work, and seem like a lot of focus on potentially negative things every day, but our turning around, our changing, it doesn't just happen in big, obvious ways where we have redirected ourselves away from some form of evil. It happens in small, intentional ways, as well. It happens because we are the Church, and even more specifically, we are Armour Heights Church.

At Armour Heights we have a lot going on. And every element of what we offer involves vision and transformation. We're in the business of preparing, of changing hearts and minds, of offering new perspectives that lead to transformative living in God's world. Bible studies, group discussions around podcasts and books; activities that connect us to specific elements of our faith and faith stories; mindfulness and physical care for the

bodies God has gifted us with; Sunday school lessons and opportunities to reach out to and connect with those in our community; service to other ministries in the city; times of intentional fellowship where we share not just what's resting there on the surface, but dare to go deeper with one another and share what's truly on our hearts—all of this is done with a vision to both look back and point forward to Jesus, to new life. It's a constant rekindling of the vision of resurrection to new life in our commitments and relationships. Layer by layer, relationship by relationship, a little here and a little there until we are entirely recreated by God; until we are fully transformed into the light of God's grace.

May we leave here today with the same exuberance that John the Baptist greets us with at the opening of Mark's gospel; with an energy and spirit for preparation; with a desire to open our hearts and minds and let go and change. Advent is a time to open ourselves to transforming moments and focus on Jesus' message to us; a message that asks us to love. Amen.