



A SERMON

by Rev. Joann H. Lee: December 7, 2025



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.'*

I AM OF THE FIRM OPINION THAT WE NEED LESS SANTAS AND MORE JOHN THE BAPTISTS DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON. Forget the red suit and jolly "Ho! Ho! Ho!" I want people dressed up in camel's hair and yelling, "REPENT, you brood of vipers!"

Now, *that's* the way to prepare for Christmas! Isaiah foretold it, and John the Baptist came and fulfilled it. That word "repent," though, is fraught with centuries of misinterpretation and negative connotation.

Now, I know that I may seem to you like a classic Presbyterian – I was baptized in the Presbyterian Church, my parents and their parents were Presbyterians. But part of my faith formation, as a Korean American child of immigrants, was that we were part of a very ecumenical Korean church consortium in Houston. So, if the Korean Methodist church had a VBS, we would sign up. If the Korean Catholic church had a retreat, we might join them. And if the Korean Baptist church down the street was holding a revival, we would go.

And it was precisely there, that I found my love of repentance. Again and again, throughout my youth, I would give my life to Jesus at every altar call. I would think of all the ways I had sinned and failed as a wretched human being. I would recall every mean thought and deed I had committed in all my twelve years of life, and just in case the last time didn't stick, I'd go up to the front of the church, repent of my ways, and get saved yet again.

Honestly, it felt good, cathartic, a big relief. It became like a high I would chase. I had what many ex-evangelicals call "salvation anxiety," that's when you're a little obsessed with making sure that you've fully repented of all your wrongs, so that your ticket to heaven is never in jeopardy.

My theology has evolved a bit since then—thanks to the grace of God and amazing people who patiently loved and challenged me.

Sadly, though, many of those pastors preaching at those revivals still hold onto that same kind of faith—you know, the "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" type.

Offentimes, these preachers were manipulating our young emotions, fears, and guilt, so that *they* could feel like they were doing kingdom work. While some of them probably did have the best of intentions, I imagine others wanted to stroke their egos, thinking something like: "Look at all these vulnerable teenagers crying and begging for forgiveness. Truly, I am a man of God!" (And, yes, 100% of the time, these revival speakers were men.)

I'm quite certain that many of them saw themselves in the great line of John the Baptists and other prophets and preachers, calling for repentance and saving souls for Jesus.

But *is* that what John the Baptist was doing? Is that what he meant by repent?

You see, most of us think that repentance means feeling sorry for what we've done wrong. But it means so much more than that.

Randy Loubier is an author and theologian who recently tackled this complicated word "repent" in his Substack (or online journal)¹. He writes, "Jesus didn't call people to feel sorry for sin — He called them to see God differently."

The Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, which literally means "a change of mind or to think differently." In Hebrew the word is *shuv*, meaning, to turn. Repentance, then, is a turning of our minds, hearts, bodies, and souls to the ways of God.

When we sing, "The world is about to turn..." we sing of repentance. But we sing of repentance in a way that we don't ordinarily think of when we hear that word.

Loubier writes:

...Jesus didn't lead with moral repentance. He didn't walk up to the woman caught in adultery and say, "You need to admit you're a sinner...."
He didn't tell Zacchaeus,
"Confess your greed before you climb down from that tree."
He didn't tell the Samaritan woman,
"Say the sinner's prayer and (then) give me a drink." ...
Jesus never told (people) they were going to hell for personal sin;
He told them they were invited into life.
He didn't shame the lost—He sought them.
He didn't condemn the guilty—He forgave them.
That's repentance as *metanoia*. It's a change of perspective so profound that your direction, (your entire life even) shifts.
When Jesus said, "Repent and believe the Gospel," He wasn't saying, "Feel bad because you're sinful." He was saying, "Open your eyes (and your hearts and minds)! (For) God's Kingdom has arrived right in front of you. (So) Don't miss it!"
It was an invitation, not an accusation.
His message to the everyday (person) wasn't, "You've failed." It was, "Look up! Heaven is invading earth!"
"Repent," then, means to change how (we experience) reality. (We must) stop living like God is far away. Turn (away) from fear, shame, anxiety, and unbelief—
and see that (God) has come close.²

Emmanuel, after all, means God with us.

In today's scripture, John the Baptist has that very same invitation for those seeking to be baptized in the Jordan. The Israelites had to cross the Jordan river before becoming a people, God's people. And so John takes them back to where it all began, that body of water that forged them into a community that belonged to God.

And his invitation to baptism was an invitation to new life and a new way of being, a *metanoia*, a repentance, an invitation to change how we see and experience God, and a turning *from* the ways of the world *towards* the ways of God.

John the Baptist, however, also had an accusation, but it is saved only for the religious leaders, calling them a "Brood of Vipers" for the ways they manipulate and prey on the vulnerable.

Perhaps these leaders have used repentance as a weapon or tool for manipulation. Perhaps they have not shared the good news but instead scared the people into obedience. Whatever the reason, John the Baptist does not approve. He even wishes they had not come to the Jordan for baptism!

¹ https://randyloubier1.substack.com/p/maybe-weve-got-repent-wrong?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=5356843&post_id=178017503&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=8r1h7&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email

² *Ibid.*

And yet, even *they* have the opportunity to repent and turn towards God, to have a change of heart and mind about the way they think about God, and about the way they think about their ministry as religious leaders. Even *they* are invited to new life and a new way of being in the world.

So, no one is beyond redemption. No one falls outside of God's grace, even if we might be reluctant to offer it. And that is the good news of the gospel.

Loubier says: "Repentance is wonder, not woe, and repentance (is an) Invitation to joy."³

I would add to that that repentance is the gateway to peace. Our spiritual ancestors in the Reformed Tradition, who designed our worship services, understood this.

In our bulletins, you'll see that we start worship with singing and a hymn. And early on, there is also a Prayer of Confession, followed by an Assurance of Pardon, a Gloria, and then The Peace.

The Presbyterian Directory for Worship, which is part of the church's constitution, says: "This turn from communal praise to corporate confession, established on the promise of God's grace, is one of the hallmarks of the Reformed tradition."⁴

As Presbyterians within the Reformed tradition, we don't go to Confession with a priest like our Catholic siblings do; we rarely hold revivals with altar calls, but each Sunday, we come together and confess together our corporate and individual sin.

The Directory for Worship continues to say: "As members of Christ's body, we confess the reality of sin, captivity, and brokenness in personal and common life and ask for God's saving grace. A declaration of forgiveness proclaims the good news of God's mercy and offers the assurance of pardon in Jesus' name."⁵ Then, and only then, are we able to pass the peace with one another. Because repentance is the gateway to peace.

Once we have turned away from sin and turned towards God, once we have honestly faced who we are and our own brokenness, once we have asked for forgiveness, and been forgiven, *then*, the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding is ours to give and share with one another.

Where there is no justice, there is no peace, right? And how can there be justice without repentance? True repentance leads us to peace. True repentance turns us towards the ways of peace. True repentance reorients us to Christ's peace.

And this is the season when we light candles for peace. So may peace reign in our hearts. May peace cease the warring of nations. May peace be for all peoples in all places as we turn back to God in true repentance.

And so we sing, asking our Emmanuel to come and fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

May it be so, Amen.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Book of Order, Directory for Worship: W-3.0205.*

⁵ *Ibid.*