

Repent and Follow

Part 2 of Sermon Series: *Living In Between*

a sermon based on

Luke 3:1-6 & Malachi 3:1-4

and delivered on

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at

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In that passage from Malachi (which Hannah read a few moments ago) we hear, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me **AND** (emphasis added) the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” (Mal. 3:1a) Then we turn to the Gospel reading where Saint Luke sets the scene telling us when it was that John the Baptizer – that messenger preparing the way – came to prepare the way proclaiming his baptism of repentance.

But wait there’s more. John didn’t preach a baptism of repentance for repentance’s sake. He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is good news.

This is good news because it leads to an understanding of what the prophet Isaiah meant when he spoke about making the path straight and level and smooth so that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Lk. 3:5-6)

Recently, Susan and I watched *Evan Almighty*. It’s not a new movie. It came out in 2007 as a sequel to *Bruce Almighty*. I enjoyed *Bruce Almighty*. I thought it had some good insights. But I never gave *Evan Almighty* a chance, because I thought it would be a complete heresy. God promised – he put his bow in the sky to remind humanity – that there would never be a flood like that again, and here was this movie in which God asks Evan to build an ark to prepare for a flood. Without giving away any spoilers, I learned that sometimes you have to watch the thing before you judge. Just like sometimes we need to hear someone out, before we jump to conclusions about where he or she is going.

That movie also had a good line. I may not be quoting it exactly but when God is trying to convince Evan to build the ark he says, “Everything I do, I do because I love you.”

Sometimes it doesn’t feel like that. Does it? But it’s true. Before we hear about John calling people to repentance, we need to hear that God sent him to do that because he loved us. We need to remember that even before John was a glimmer in Zechariah’s eye, God spoke through Isaiah about that voice that would cry out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord so that all flesh could see the salvation of God.

See, the only time we need to repent is when we’re on the wrong path. There’s no need to turn around and to straighten out if we’re okay. So when John the Baptist or any other preacher starts talking about repentance it can put us on edge, especially during Advent – the run up to Christmas. Am I right? How many of us like to think about our flaws and failures? I don’t see any hands up. We certainly don’t like it when someone else points it out or maybe compels us to do that sort of introspection. Because it hurts.

Nowadays there’s a lot of talk about “shaming”. Any non-praising criticism is “shaming” We shouldn’t shame people. We really shouldn’t. But... If we look up the definition of “shaming” we find that the purpose of shaming is to stimulate painful feelings. A call to repentance is a call to joyful feelings and life. A call to repentance either points out or helps us to take stock of those things that are getting in the way of claiming the salvation that God offers through Jesus Christ.

When my doctor tells me that I’m fat, she’s not just pointing out the elephant in the room (pun intended). Instead, she is pointing out that visible evidence that my lifestyle isn’t as healthy as it should be. She’s pointing out that I’m missing out on opportunities to enjoy life in ways that I can’t now, and she wants me to change – to repent – to turn around – to follow another path that can help me get the most out of life. Right? Do we really want our physicians to ignore that ugly black spot on the side of our neck that already makes us self-conscious, when they suspect it could be an easily treated cancer?

Everything God says and does is because he loves you, even when it stings or burns. I don’t know the preacher’s full name, but a preacher named Robert shared this story on a preachers website.

He says that when he was a boy there was an empty field near his house. But it wasn't an inviting field. It was filled with thorns and brambles, allergy inducing weeds, and just an ugly mess. In fact, kids were severely discouraged from playing in that field.

Then one night, a fire started. No one knows how. Whether it was a lightning strike, whether it was a fire that got away from one of the "knights of the road" as he called them from the nearby railroad yards, or even some kid playing with matches, it didn't matter. That wasteland was consumed in flames, well before the local volunteer fire department could get there to stop it. In fact, the fire had almost burned itself out before they arrived. The next morning all that remained was a black, ashen landscape. As a boy, Robert expected it to remain so.

But when spring came, something happened. New grasses and flowers emerged from the earth, free to grow without the entanglement of the weeds and briars and thorns. That field which had at one time been forbidden for play, became the primary playground for years afterwards.¹

Repentance calls us to recognize that we need to change. Even though it might sting, its purpose is like the refiner's fire that Malachi spoke to; its purpose is to make room for the bountiful life God has prepared for us. It's an invitation to claim the right path that Jesus offers. Sometimes because that path isn't always as obvious as we think.

This season of Advent is a season of preparation – a season of expectation – in which we ready ourselves for Jesus Christ's entrance into our lives as we remember and re-live the story of his birth in Bethlehem 2000+ years ago.

We know how to prepare for our Christmas celebrations. We decorate. We deck the halls with gay apparel. Fa-la-la Fa-la-la-la-la. But what if you don't like red and green? What if you prefer orange and black? It would be easy enough to get the "wrong" decorations. Menards has Christmas decorations out before Halloween while the Halloween decorations are still there. If someone didn't know better, they might think that a skeleton hanging from the front door looked better than a wreath as a Christmas decoration.

Ridiculous – I know, but there are so many ways that – even as Christians – our lifestyles get confounded with worldly patterns that lead us down other paths to where we don't see the salvation of God, and might ultimately forget or give up on the possibility.

But God hasn't given up! Everything God does is because he loves you. He loves you so much, that he came to live as a human being. He submitted himself to the indignity of having no speech – so that all he could do was to trust Mary to know whether his cry meant that he was hungry, hurting, or the sign of a soiled diaper. He submitted himself to the ridicule of people who just didn't get it. He allowed himself to be tortured and executed on the cross so that you would know that everything he does is because he loves you and wants you to know his salvation.

So when God does draw your attention to some failure or flaw in your lifestyle – he does it not to shame you or to point out how unworthy you are of your grace, but to show you what needs to be removed so that you can see the salvation that's been waiting for you since before time.

This season, claim the gift of repentance. Claim the opportunity for self-reflection so that when Christmas arrives, you might see in the eyes of that baby lying in the manger the fullness

¹ <https://www.sermonsuite.com/emphasis-preaching-journal/sermon-illustrations-advent-2-2018>

of God's love for you. The fullness of a God who entrusts you with his love just like he trusted Mary and Joseph to care for him in his infancy and youth, just as he trusted John to prepare the way. He's prepared the way of salvation, when we turn down that pathway, he assures us that although it might start out rough or seem crooked, that he will smooth and straighten our journey the longer we follow. AMEN.