

## ADVENT 2 2009

Luke 3:1-6 "Repentance is a U-Turn"

(X) = Powerpoint slide transition point.

In Advent the texts tell of the coming of Jesus. But its not the coming of Jesus most of us think of first. Usually we think of Bethlehem with Angels and shepherds, a baby in a manger. But in Advent we hear of the second coming of Christ at the end of time.

How do we prepare for Christ's second coming? The Gospel text is very clear.

"**Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand**". So the question for today is "What is repentance?" There are two parts to repentance. The first part we call (X)

"**CONFESSION**", the admission of guilt and the second part is called (X)

"**AMENDMENT OF LIFE**", the turning around and going a different direction. Both are hard to do. Confession, or admission of guilt, is hard. We don't like to admit we have done wrong. (X) There are many ways we avoid confession. Let me list four:

1) (X) We **rationalize** our sin, "Everyone is doing it." Or we create new codes whereby we give ourselves permission to be sinful and call it "modern morality".

2) (X) We make **excuses** for our sin, "I can't cope any longer so I quit." Quit my marriage, quit being honest, quit loving, quit being kind, etc.

3) (X) Instead of confessing we **minimize** sin. "Oh, I make mistakes, everyone does, but I'm not a gross sinner like murderers or liars, or cheats, or the idle rich, or the lazy poor. Judgment is for them, not for me.

4) (X) We **blame others**, "It's his fault or her fault... I wouldn't have to cheat or be so mean if the world would just treat me fair."

The world will not teach us to confess our sin. The world cynically says, "Confession may be good for the soul, but it's bad for the reputation." But failure to confess, to admit our sin is to fall into Satan's trap, to keep us from turning to God for forgiveness.

And so we spend lots of emotional and psychic energy denying our sin and repressing our guilt when we should just confess it. We think that by repressing our guilt, by denying that we sin, we will be okay. But it doesn't work.

Many think that all there is to repentance is saying "I'm sorry." But more often being "sorry" means "I'm sorry I got caught". Being "sorry" for sin is only a feeling of

remorse for the damage that sin causes because sin always, always, always presents it's bill – hurt, anger, resentment, pain, suffering. Being “sorry” doesn't help, doesn't fix anything. Confession means admitting that we have done wrong. In church we learn to confess our sins in the liturgy each week.

We begin worship with confession, “We confess that we have sinned against You in thought, word and deed in what we have done and what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” That's confession. We are admitting what we have done. And what do we say next? “Therefore we flee for refuge to Your infinite mercy, seeking and imploring your grace for the sake of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Then we can hear the gospel... “In Christ Jesus your sins are forgiven.”

The second part of repentance is the “amendment of life” or doing things differently. It is what we do after we have confessed our sin.

The word "repent" in Greek is (X) "Metanoia". It means (X) “a divinely effected change of heart which leads to salvation”. (Ibid. p. 590). In other words, to “repent” means literally (X) a U-Turn.

Let me give you an example. Let's say you are riding with your friend and your destination is downtown Seattle. You get to I5 and your friend who is driving turns south toward Tacoma. You say to him, "Ah, excuse me, but you're going the wrong way." And your friend says, "Oh, you're right, I'm terribly sorry, I'm going the wrong way." And he continues driving in the same direction. You protest and say, "You're going the wrong way...stop, turn around and go back!" And your friend says, "Opps, You're right, I'm going the wrong way. I'm so sorry, please forgive me." And he continues going straight ahead. If repentance is first the admission of guilt and second the amendment of life, i.e. making a U-Turn, you'd have to say that your friend had only gone half way in his repenting.

I am reminded of a young woman I knew who was dating a man who was incredibly jealous. He wanted her to spend all her time with him. When she tried to break up with him he cried and carried on so that she decided she couldn't hurt his feelings so she stayed with him. But his jealousy only got worse. If she talked with another guy he became furious. In time his outbursts escalated to slapping and then hitting. Afterward he would apologize profusely and cry and say he was sorry and would never do it again. They would make up...and their relationship would be good, in fact, excellent for awhile. But then the cycle would repeat. She was afraid to break up with him. When she finally told he they were through he came over to her house and started beating her. Her little brother tried to defend his sister and the man beat

up the younger brother. At this point the police got involved and the woman was able to break free from his abuse.

Well, it's the same with our sin. We can say "I'm sorry" and continue on our own merry way thinking that God is satisfied with us for being sorry for our sin. Repentance is also turning around, going another way. We call it "the amendment of life".

So, is repentance really up to us? Now here's where things get theological and the water gets deeper. We say that (X) [without repentance forgiveness is impossible](#). That is what the world teaches. But the Bible says that (X) [without forgiveness, repentance is impossible](#).

Now I can just hear you saying, "Hold on a minute there Pastor. I can understand the first part of that...without repentance, forgiveness is impossible, for that is the way of the world. But the second part I'm not so sure about...that without forgiveness, repentance is impossible."

Let me explain. [Repentance is our responsibility](#), yes. The Bible calls us to repent over and over again. (X) [God demands repentance](#). Luke recorded the sermon of Peter in the book of Acts...

(X) ["Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."](#) Acts 2:38 (Peter's sermon on Pentecost.) and again...

(X) ["Repent then, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."](#) Acts 3:19 (Peter at the gate of the temple.) and (X) [God even commands that we repent](#).

(X) ["In the past God overlooked ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice."](#) Acts 17:30 (Paul in Athens at the Aereopagus)

The Bible is very clear about the fact that we are to repent. But the Bible also says that (X) [God enables repentance](#).

(X) ["God exalted him \(Jesus\) to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel."](#) Acts 5:31, (Peter before the Sanhedrin).

(X) God enables repentance. (X) "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the gentiles repentance unto life." Acts 11:18, (Peter explaining to the disciples in Jerusalem that the H.S. was being given to the gentiles.)

And St. Paul says about repentance:

(X) "Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" Rom 2:4

Without the hope of forgiveness, indeed, the promise of forgiveness, repentance would be the ultimate foolishness...you don't go around admitting your faults if you know you will be punished. You don't stick out your neck if you're going to lose your head.

But God promises to forgive and God backed up the promise by sending Jesus into our world to be the means by which we are forgiven. God did this, not because we asked for it because we didn't. We were too busy hiding or denying or excusing or rationalizing or projecting our guilt. No, God did this unilaterally because God loves us and wants us to be reconciled to Him. God wants us to be in a perfect, right relationship with Him, a relationship that is open, joyful, honest, dependent and free. And we can't have that if we are hiding something from God.

So God promises to forgive us. That's the gospel. God offers us forgiveness, salvation, life. God says, "Trust me! I will forgive you. Repent and receive my forgiveness!"

God has stormed the fortress of this world in Jesus. We are besieged by God's love in Jesus and the battle is on for our hearts and minds and souls. God is not willing to let Satan and his allies, sin and death, hold us in bondage. So, God sent Jesus to do battle with these forces and to set us free from sin and death.

God began this salvation in a specific time and a specific place...in Bethlehem, in a barn, in the cold of winter, a long time ago. Jesus came into the world as a gentle, meek and mild baby in a manger.

The second coming of Jesus will not be like his first coming. The second coming will be with great power and glory. In his coming he will judge us. By his righteous judging he will cleanse us. By his cleansing he will sanctify us and prepare us to live with Him forever.<sup>1</sup> Thanks be to God. AMEN.

---

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of this theme of judgment in an Advent sermon he preached in 1928:

"It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God . . . . We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for every one who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) pp. 185-186.

#### Other thoughts:

You've seen it on T.V. Someone has seriously hurt or killed someone and the family of the victim says to the guilty person, "I forgive you for what you have done." It's incredible! Only God can move a person to that kind of forgiveness. The world says, "without repentance forgiveness is impossible" and in saying this we hold power over the perpetrator until we have exacted "repentance" from him. Then, and only then, we might forgive. To proclaim forgiveness before there is repentance can, may, might move a person to repent. That's the risk one takes in forgiving. Forgiveness is expensive...that's why it is difficult and rare in the world of humans. It is possible that you might forgive someone who has hurt you and that person does not repent or change their behavior. But what has God done? God sent Jesus to be the means of our forgiveness. And God invites us to receive this forgiveness in Christ Jesus. It is a risky business to forgive. Yet God takes that risk, calling us to respond to his grace in Christ and in receiving it to repent.