

**The Rev. Barry P. Kubler  
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Plant City, Florida**

**Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2019  
Matthew 3: 1-12**

**In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen!**

**For all of its ostentatiousness, one of the things I enjoy doing during the Advent season, is walking through the stores at the malls, looking at the Christmas decorations, and listening to the Christmas music. It provides a lift to my spirit.**

**From a simply cultural standpoint, if you have any doubt that Christmas is right around the corner, take a trip to the mall. The evidence is abundant - wreaths, garland, lights, ornaments, fake snow, assorted holiday knick knacks, sideboard Christmas figures, decorated trees of every kind, and lots of wrapped presents. I'm also sure that many of you, like my wife and I do, have decorated your homes for Christmas.**

**For a number of weeks now, I've been thinking about all of those decorations. And, I have a question for you. Which one of all the decorations you've seen, or put up around your home, do you think is the most important decoration of them all? For most people it would probably be the Christmas tree, or maybe the creche, with Mary and Joseph, and baby Jesus prominently displayed. However, for others, it might be something else.**

**This morning I want to talk to you about that 'something else' - another kind of decoration. One offered us from God's perspective. I believe it's the most important decoration of them all. Let me give you a few hints. First of all, it's invisible. Second, it's also visible. And, finally, it's a decoration that God wants us to leave up all year round. So, what is it?**

**Well, imagine yourself going to the mall, and standing in line, so that your child, or grandchildren, can get his or her picture taken with Santa Claus. However, when you get to the front of the line, to your surprise, you don't see a big, jolly man, with a red suit, a jovial face and a long white beard. Instead, you are confronted with a scrawny looking middle eastern man, of an indeterminate age, with a leathery face - and a long, messy, beard. He's clothed in what appears to be some type of brown animal skin, which you don't find out until much later, is made out of camel hair. He's also eating what looks like grasshoppers and wild honey.**

**My friends, meet John the Baptist, the one Jesus has called the greatest of all the prophets. Over the next few minutes we're going to take a closer look at his life, listen to what he has to say, and learn about the most important Christmas decoration of them all. One that God desires for each us.**

In the third chapter of Matthew's gospel we are told that John lived in the Judean desert, near the river Jordan. His preaching and prophetic message was very simple and straightforward - 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' The Messiah is coming. The Savior of the world would soon take away the sins of the world. And he would send his disciples into the world to share a Gospel of Good News with others. Not long after, he would come again on Judgment Day. That day is near, John says, and it's time to repent.

My friends, John's call to repentance offers us an interesting illustration. Matthew tells us that John the Baptist 'was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah,' who said he was, 'A voice of one calling in the desert, 'prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah said that John the Baptist was coming. And now look at how John describes repentance, 'make straight paths for him. Make straight paths in your heart, and in your life.'

For John, repentance is similar to what we might call 'radical road construction.' A construction project that takes place inside each one of us. As we grow and mature in life, our thoughts, our desires, our wants, our feelings, the motivations for our actions - all those things, at some point, tend to get a little crooked inside us. Our souls tend to develop spiritual pot holes. Our love for God, tends to fluctuate, unpleasantly, up and down. And John reminds us of our ongoing need, saying to us, 'Repent.' Make a straight path, a straight road, for God.

In Old Testament times, often, before a king would visit a town, the town would engage in radical road construction. If the road into town had high spots, they would be leveled. If the road had low spots, they would be filled in. Potholes would be repaired. If the road was crooked, it would be straightened out. Once the road way was smooth and straight, it was ready for the king to arrive. This morning John says to us, as he did in the first century, this needs to happen in our lives. Our thoughts, our desires, our wants, our feelings, our love for God, need to be straightened out.

My brothers and sisters, of all the Christmas decorations, I believe that is the most important one of all - an attitude of repentance. It's 'invisible' because it's a change that takes place inside each one of us - a big change. That's what John was illustrating with his own lifestyle. He didn't wear Tommy Hilfiger, or Adidas, or Polo's. He wore camel hair. The same clothes that the poor of his day would be wearing. His leather belt was considered something cheap. His grasshopper and honey diet was the diet of the disadvantaged and underprivileged. He lived in the open desert, instead of in a nice condo on the beach. It wasn't hard to see the point that John was making to those around him. His lifestyle shouted out - what I'm doing on the inside, I want you to do on the inside - get rid of your love for things, for your desire for more than you will ever need. Get rid of your pride. Be someone who is humble, someone who is

focused on spiritual things, someone who recognizes that the priorities in life are God first, others second and self third.

My friends, John uses strong language in Matthew's gospel story today. The Pharisees and the Saduccees had arrived at the Jordan river. Outwardly, they were very pious, but inwardly, they were proud and materialistic. John calls them a brood of vipers, and tells them to produce fruit in keeping with their repentance. The Pharisees and Saduccees claimed to be humble and spiritual, but their actions were a clear contradiction. John compares them to a fruit tree, and tells them that the 'axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.' He condemns the Pharisees and Saduccees, because they would not change. They would not repent. They would say and do things to make themselves look pious and spiritual. But there was no real change in their hearts and lives. They were proud and materialistic and liked it that way.

My brothers and sisters, like our ancestors, we too struggle with those afflictions. It's easy to act humble and spiritual. It's easy to show up in church and smile and shake a hand and talk about the real meaning of Christmas. It's easy to place an appropriate frown on our face when people talk about pride and materialism.

But let me ask you this - is that the kind of religion you're really looking for? What is it that lies at the heart of your religious expectations? What do you really need from your religious faith? Most people are looking for a religion that makes them feel good about themselves. And that's perfectly understandable. But is that really what we need? Is that what we're really looking for? Something that makes us feel good about ourselves? Or, is there more to our faith than just feeling good?

Truth is, that's not what Christianity, or John the Baptist, is about. John the Baptist isn't standing out in the desert telling everyone to smile, because God loves you just the way you are. And then everyone leaves the desert and goes home and feels good about themselves. John the Baptist is telling us to change - to stop fooling ourselves - to be different from how we normally are. But, being human, we don't like hearing that. Whether we want to admit it, or not, we're a lot more like the Pharisees and Sadducees that John condemns in the desert. Whether we want to admit it, or not, we often act pious and religious, but deep down inside, we like being proud and materialistic.

My brothers and sisters, the Good News John the Baptist shares with us is that we can repent of those proclivities in life. We can do what our ancestors did in verse eight, 'confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.' Those people confessed their pride, and their materialism, and they were forgiven by God at their baptism. In the same way, we too can confess our sins, and receive God's forgiveness. There is nothing God wants more than to forgive us for our pride, our materialism, and our hesitancy in repenting. God loves a changed heart.

God forgives us because of the one that would come after John. 'After me, will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry,' says John. He was powerful, and yet humble, not obsessed with material things, but those things spiritual. The one who was coming would produce more fruit than any other person that ever lived. He allowed himself to be cut down and thrown into the fire, even though he had done nothing wrong. And he did it for us - for you and me.

My friends, when you walk out of here today, you can walk out of here with the same comfort those people felt who were baptized by John in the desert. They walked away knowing that their sins were forgiven. They walked away empowered to make real changes in their lives, changes that glorified God. We have the exact same comfort those people had - perhaps even more, because we know how Jesus has taken away our sins. And like those people we have been given the strength to make real changes in our lives - to straighten out what's in our hearts, and to demonstrate it in our every day living.

Not too many years ago a story appeared in the newspaper about a man from Kansas named Al Johnson. It was a story of repentance. Johnson had repented, and came to believe in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Now, what made that story so remarkable was not Johnson's conversion, but the fact that as a result of his newfound faith in Jesus Christ, he confessed to a bank robbery he participated in when he was nineteen years old. Because the statute of limitations in his case had run out, Johnson could not be prosecuted for the crime. However, because he had repented - because of the change Jesus had made in his heart, he not only publicly confessed his crime, he repaid every cent of the money he had stolen. That, my friends, is repentance - a radical reconstruction of the heart.

My brothers and sisters, of all the decorations we possess this Christmas, our repentance is the most important one of all. It's invisible, because it first takes place in our hearts. It is God, through the Holy Spirit changing us. It's visible, because we become empowered to demonstrate our repentance in our lives - just like a former bank robber named Al Johnson. And unlike our other Christmas decorations, our repentance is something that we can leave up throughout the year. Amen.