

It's still technically the church season of Advent, which, strictly speaking, has more to do with how Jesus comes today and the fact that he is going to come again to "judge the living and the dead" than just a "pre-Christmas". Historically, Christians held off on their celebration of Christmas until Christmas day – celebrating the 12 days of Christmas, *after* December 25<sup>th</sup>. But let's be real, y'all are in full Christmas swing. You've decorated your home for Christmas, not Advent (sure, you may have an Advent wreath or calendar, but you know the tree and lights and nativity are up too). You've got Christmas, not Advent tunes on at home while you bake Christmas, not Advent cookies.

So, with Christmas so very much on the mind, think for a moment about this: what is the one word you associate most closely with Christmas?

I think if we took a poll, there are a few Christmas buzz words that would separate from the others.

Like *joy* – *Joy to the World*, you can't go wrong with joy at Christmas.

Maybe *peace* would be up there – it's what the angels promised the shepherds, "peace to men on whom his favor rests."

Then there is the obvious *Jesus*, right? Without Jesus Christ there is no Christmas.

Maybe it's not those three, maybe you have a different one – a word you most closely associate with Christmas.

I have one word in mind today. I'm betting the word I have in mind is one that none of you picked. It's a word that ought to be very closely associated with Christmas, but I'm betting that for most of you it wouldn't even make the top 10 (before this sermon of course, hopefully after I'm done it will be a word you associate with Christmas).

Do you want to know the word?

Here's a hint: I'm guessing it would make the top 10 of John the Baptist, it might even be number 1.

Repentance.

I don't know what you think of when you hear that word, *repentance*. Repent, repentance is this churchy word, right? You probably don't hear or read the word anywhere else but in church. Even if you didn't grow up going to church, you probably know that it's a word that is closely associated with saying you are sorry, apologizing for something. Just a "higher, churchier" way of saying sorry is how you might loosely define it.

I don't know what you think of when you hear the word repentance, but I'm guessing the Christmas story isn't what comes to mind.

You picture little baby Jesus in the manger, his mother looking glowingly at her new little boy, the shepherds crowding around – it's a picture that just screams *repent*, doesn't it? Not naturally, not the way we think about Christmas.

But I actually think it is a word that should be very closely tied to the Christmas story, and I think John the Baptist would agree with me. So, let's talk about

repentance – a word that was used to summarize the mission and message of John the Baptist, and let's see what in the world it has to do with Christmas.

To help you better understand repentance, Christmas, and John the Baptist's message, let me tell you the story of a few John and Jane Doe Christians.

John, John was raised Christian. He was raised to believe in God. He knows who Jesus is. He can tell you the super condensed, readers digest message of the Bible – he knows John 3:16. He goes to church. He puts money in the plate every time it goes by – he thinks he's pretty generous with his offerings. He's always polite, he helps with ushering. Everyone at his local church thinks of him as a stand-up Christian.

But then John leaves the church property and it is like a switch flips. When a car pulls out in front of him on the way home he speeds up and rides the bumper, cursing bad drivers under his breath. The guys he works with don't think of him as polite and helpful – they've seen him fly off the handle one too many times to associate him with politeness. Then there are the rabbit-holes of pornography that John chases down on an almost nightly basis – the kinds of things that would make the sweet old ladies he shakes hands with on Sunday faint.

John believes in God, he knows that Jesus came to forgive sin – all sin. He knows how God wants him to live, but he's not overly bent out of shape with his Monday through Saturday behavior. He hopes that if he keeps doing what he's doing at church that can cover the rest.

Jane, was very much like John. She too believes in God and Jesus and the cross and forgiveness. She helps out and teaches Sunday School. She's a greeter who is always smiling.

But there's a switch that flips for Jane too.

She doesn't even have to leave church before the judgmental thoughts start: she wore *that* to church! I wouldn't be caught dead in that Monday through Friday, let alone wear it to the Lord's house! He let his kids do *that* in church! Doesn't he know how distracting that is? She leaves church frustrated and offended because Pastor didn't take the time to ask her about her week *again*, he's always too busy for her. Ah, but she gets to have wine and cheese club with her girls later today – a few glasses in and she'll be all lubed up to unload her frustrations on willing ears.

Jane believes in God. She knows that Jesus came to forgive sin – all sin. She knows how God wants her to live, but it's just not healthy to keep everything bottled up. When she stops and thinks about it, she feels guilty – some of these things run through her mind when she reads the confession part of the service every Sunday. But Sunday after Sunday the wine flows, and so do the words.

To John and Jane Doe John the Baptist says: You brood of vipers! Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, "We go to church every Sunday, we volunteer and give our offerings." For I tell you that out of a pile of stones God can raise up people who will walk into church, volunteer and give offerings. The ax is already at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

John reminds us today of three key parts of repentance. The first two are the Biblical definition of repentance – sorrow over sin, and trust that because of Jesus sin is forgiven. The third part (it's not so much a part of repentance, but a product of repentance): fruit. Know that you've sinned. Know that Jesus forgives sin. Then produce fruit. Live and speak and think in ways informed by your repentance.

To people lacking in the fruit category, John's warning is clear: Trees that don't produce fruit get thrown into the fire. Repent and start living like it, or else.

Merry Christmas!

What in the world does repentance have to do with Christmas?

And isn't the theme for our service today the Jesus who brings the gift of joy? Where is the joy in this message?

Especially if you are astute enough to realize that even if your list of bad fruit isn't anywhere near the same as John and Jane Doe, you are more like them than not.

All of us, ALL OF US, who gather here around the word of our God, who confess our sins, and rejoice in the forgiveness of Jesus; all of us have that exact same switch seemingly hardwired into our brains. It is the common experience of every single Christian in this room to, on a daily basis, do and say and think the very things God would have out avoid. On a daily basis we all fail to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

So John's message of repentance is as applicable to each and every one of us as it is to John and Jane Doe, as it was to that brood of vipers slithering toward the Jordan River.

What in the world does this have to do with Christmas? And where is the joy in that inescapable truth?

On the surface, they seem very different. The joy and peace, the sermon of the angels on Christmas seems very different from this sermon about snakes and axes and unquenchable fire by John the Baptist. The celebration of baby Jesus at Christmas seem very different from this very uncomfortable reminder that none of us are doing anywhere near a good enough job at producing fruit in keeping with repentance.

On the surface it seems that the message of Christmas and the message of John the Baptist are very different. That's why that last verse from the reading today seems almost laughable when you first read it in context.

John calls them a brood of vipers, he reminds them of the ax waiting at the base of every unproductive tree, he paints the picture of Jesus come with a winnowing fork in his hand to throw the chaff into an unquenchable fire... **And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.**

"Proclaimed the good news to them?" Where's the good news in this?

But it's there. Did you see it?

**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah...**

John's answer: It's not me. No there is someone else coming after me, and I don't even deserve to stoop down and tie his shoes for him.

And who was it that John pointed the people to when they thought he might possibly be the Messiah?

The child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

The truth is this: the message of Christmas makes no sense without the message of repentance.

This message of repentance, this truth that you and I, even though we should know so much better, keep on failing, day after day, to consistently produce fruit in keeping with repentance – that message is why Christmas had to happen in the first place.

Christmas happened because we have a God who saw that we are absolutely incapable of being the people we need to be. He knew that no matter how many John the Baptist's he sent, no matter how often you sit in church and hear a message about your sin against God, the forgiveness he gives you, and the fruit that should grow from that repentance; he knew that you and I are simply too far gone to stop that switch from flipping.

Christmas happened because God saw that about us and decided to do for us what we can't do for ourselves. God decided to send his Son to be born, as a human being on earth, to be our Messiah (Messiah = Hebrew, Greek = Christ, both mean "anointed one") – the one whose God-given task would be saving people who can't save themselves. That is why that baby was laid in that manger: to save people who are no good at producing fruit in keeping with repentance – not as often, not as consistently as we should.

The message of repentance, at its core, is not a message that is meant to put on you the burden of getting better and producing more fruit, or else. It is a message that reminds us that Christmas was necessary – because we are a brood of poisonous vipers, and the only we can end up as the wheat in Jesus' barn rather than the chaff in unquenchable fire is if that baby in that manger, that Messiah, does for us what we can't do ourselves.

That's the joy. That's the connection to Christmas.

Martin Luther once said that the life of a Christian is a life of repentance – a life lived continually aware of the fact that Christmas was necessary because we can't save ourselves.