

“From Beginning To End”

Philippians 1:6

December 9, 2012

2nd Sunday in Advent

If you are a life-long Lutheran, then you not only know about Advent, but you probably know the themes of the Sundays in Advent by heart. The 1st Sunday is always a kick off for the season which emphasizes the coming of Jesus. A tradition that has recently been restored is the reading of Jesus' coming into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The 3rd Sunday has joy as its theme with the lighting of the pink candle to symbolize that. The 4th Sunday usually has something to do with Mary.

The 2nd Sunday though might be thought of as “John the Baptist Sunday”. We sing “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” and read about John the Baptist. The theme is one of sin and repentance. We think that (at least for the duration of the service) we should think about our sin more and feel really bad and guilty. Then we should breathe a sigh of relief and forget about it.

But there is much more to repentance than this. Repentance is more than simply feeling sorry for your sin. The Greek word for repentance literally means “a change of mind”. Biblical repentance is a complete turn around – a turning from sin to God.

As difficult as this might appear to be, nevertheless, we think we can pull it off. In fact, I think we have divided the whole reconciliation process with God in this way. Repentance is something that we do through much reflection and spiritual struggle. Forgiveness then is something God does through His grace. Thus, the 2nd Sunday in Advent becomes a time for us to sufficiently struggle with our sin, turn from it, and turn to God. Then, God can forgive us.

However, this is totally untrue. We do not carry out our repentance. Unbelievers are unable to repent because of the spiritual condition in which they find themselves. According to the Scriptures, such people are “dead in [their] transgressions and sins.” Their “sinful mind is hostile to God.” (Rom. 8:7) Unbelievers can’t repent because they don’t know that they need to repent and they are hostile to God’s call to repent.

Thankfully, we, as Christians, are much better or are we? Some Christians sincerely believe that they don't need to repent because of the level of sanctified living which they are doing. One televangelist, in critiquing a common order of confession of sins, said, "I'm not poor. I'm not miserable. And I'm not a sinner." Repentance, some Christians believe, is for people when they want to become members of the church. After that, it's not necessary.

Or, is it? John the Baptist came preaching, not to Gentiles and unbelievers, but to Jews. His place of preaching was on the other side of the Jordan River outside the boundaries of the Promised Land. He was saying, in essence, that the people needed to leave the Promised Land, be re-converted, and then re-enter the Promised Land. That was highly offensive to the Jews who felt no need to repent since they were already God's people - descendants of Abraham. But John said, "And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."

God's people, even those of today, need repentance. Yet, we are unable to do that mostly because we don't want to do that. I believe that we are willing to admit and repent of sinfulness in general. Yet when we have to confront a particular sin, we are not so willing. We might deny that we are doing that sin. Or, if we can't deny the sinful action, we can always come up with a reason why it's okay for us to do it. We are always able to find some justification or rationalization for the sin in our lives.

This becomes a very serious matter when we consider the consequences. If there is no repentance, there is no forgiveness. If there is no forgiveness, there is no salvation. If there is no salvation, then there is no heaven – only death and hell.

However, what we are unable to do, God can and has done. When Jesus said, "It is finished!" and breathed His last on the cross, it really was finished. Everything necessary for our salvation was accomplished on that cross outside of Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago. This not only includes forgiveness and eternal life, but repentance, as well. It is all done by God for us through Jesus Christ.

Several times, the Bible speaks of repentance, not as an action done by human beings, but as a gift given by God. For example, when Peter was called by God to preach the Gospel to Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army, neither Peter nor the other apostles believed that these Gentiles were capable of salvation. Yet, when they came to faith through Peter's preaching of the Gospel, they all said, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:18)

Our text for today speaks of God beginning a good work in us. We don't have to do that. Repentance is the beginning of salvation. Repentance, like forgiveness, is a gift of God's grace, not a result of our spiritual struggles. It was said of John that "he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Baptism produced repentance which resulted in the forgiveness of sins.

God has worked in your lives, too. He granted you repentance in your baptism and that resulted in the forgiveness of all your sins. Both repentance and forgiveness are pure gifts – gifts of God's grace – worked in you by the Holy Spirit.

As this good work of repentance and forgiveness was begun in you by the Word of God in water, it is maintained in you by the same Word of God when it is preached and taught to you. The Law of God, when preached in all of its severity, will be used by the Holy Spirit to turn us from our sins in repentance. The Gospel of God, when preached in all of its sweetness, will be used by the Holy Spirit to turn us to God in faith.

In Luther's time, repentance (or penance as it was called back then) was an activity done at a specific point in time by a person when he or she went into a confessional booth with a priest, made a list of troubling sins, and then was given something to do to show true contrition before receiving forgiveness of sins.

Today, we think much in the same way. We think repentance is an activity that is done at a specific point in time. It is part of the ritual at the beginning of the service when we say we are sorry for our sins and hear the forgiveness spoken to us.

But isolated acts of repentance are not Biblical repentance. In the first of Luther's famous 95 Theses, he stated, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Repentance, therefore, is not a ceremony in a church service to be done once a week (or even less) and be finished. Repentance is a way of life.

We are to live in repentance by living in our baptisms where repentance was first granted to us. Every day, we can return to our baptism to have our burden of sin unloaded and to begin a life that is fresh and new. As the Small Catechism says of baptism, "The Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

We live before God in righteousness and purity when, as John the Baptist says, we bear fruits in keeping with repentance. As the Holy Spirit turned us from sin to faith in Christ, He also turns us in faith to our neighbor in need. We live a life of good works which serve our neighbor. These don't have to be complicated things. As John says, it's a matter of sharing clothes and food when you have some and you encounter those who don't. It's a matter of being honest and helpful in your occupations as John encouraged the tax collectors and soldiers to be. We do these things, not in order get right with God or become holy, but because we are right with God through Christ and have been declared to be holy by Him.

And all of this is brought to perfect completion by God. As our text says, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." God began a good work in you when He brought you to repentance through the Word of God in baptism. God sustained and strengthened that good work by giving you faith and the blessings of faith: forgiveness of sins, new life, and salvation. And God will bring that good work in you to completion at the day of Jesus Christ – the Last Day – when He returns as judge and says to you, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." (Matt. 25:34)

If you haven't noticed, we are in the Christmas season and we are inundated with the notion of wanting gifts, shopping for gifts, giving gifts, and getting gifts. While some may decry this as crass commercialism, God Himself is in the gift-giving business. Through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, which we now celebrate, God gives gifts to us: the gift of repentance, the gift of faith, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of a new life every day, and the gift of everlasting life for all eternity. They are all His work and His doing from beginning to end. Amen.