

December 5, 2004
Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

“Christmas Preparations”

Martha was not a person to mince words. Martha said what she meant and meant what she said. Martha was a life-long member of the country church we served in eastern North Carolina. Martha was the meticulous church treasurer who would spend all day looking for the problem if the books were one penny out of balance. She was a farmer who never went far from home unless it was caring for somebody in need. She was a good and compassionate neighbor who looked after the sick and needy, but she didn't tolerate foolishness, waste or laziness. In hog killing time, they said that Martha used everything in the pig except the squeel.

You knew exactly where you stood with Martha. Although she had a heart of gold, she could “put the word on you” in an instant. Martha's word exerted the same kind of influence on the rhythms of neighborhood life that the moon does on the tide. She was not a person to mince words.

John the Baptist is not a person to mince words. From the moment he opens his mouth, his words sound like a full frontal assault on the very people who come out to hear him. He calls them snakes on the verge of destruction. What a way to greet your guests! The Messiah is coming with a winnowing fork in his hand to separate the good wheat from the useless chaff. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He doesn't tolerate waste, foolishness or laziness. The coming kingdom presents those who hear the prophet's words with a crisis. It is a time of decision. The Greek work "krisis" literally means "decision." It is time to decide for or against the coming kingdom. To decide for the kingdom of heaven is to repent.

The way to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ is to repent. Suddenly, our enthusiasm for Christmas preparations takes a nose dive. If this is what it means to prepare for Christmas, then we are not very interested. When we hear the word "repent" we immediately think of street corner preachers with loud voices waving floppy black Bibles in our faces. We think of TV evangelists perfecting their weekly crying act. Visions of religious tracts with gruesome pictures dance in our heads. No. Repentance is not a part of our Christmas vocabulary. We may have known those rare moments of personal anguish when God did change our hearts and turn our lives around. But most of the time repentance is just too strong a word for our tastes. It is too heavy - too "religious." We prefer to talk about self-improvement. If we must talk about sin, then let's do it in well-ordered and carefully written prayers of confession. We think of confession like we think about a rest stop on the interstate - a brief, but necessary refreshing pause along the way to where we are going. Repentance is not a brief pause along the way. Repentance is a total change of direction. To repent is to slam on the brakes, cross the median, and go the other way.

To repent is to change. We think we understand change. We live in a changing world and we face change all the time. Most of us are pretty good at dealing with change. A new boss comes on the scene. Within a week, she announces to the staff, "Some things have got to change." Then things do change around the office. A couple is frustrated about overspending the household budget. It is bill paying time and the paychecks just don't go far enough. With a deep sigh, the husband says, "Some things have got to change!" In total agreement, the wife adds a quick "Amen!" Things do change. Or at least each one tries to limit what the other one can spend. Technology is changing the world so fast that we struggle to keep up. Telephones are getting smaller; computers are getting faster; cameras are getting more complicated and cars are getting smarter. But all this change is outside of ourselves.

The kind of change that John demands is not "out there" but "in here." To repent comes from the root word which means "to turn around" or "to change direction." To repent is to change the heart, to make a complete about face, to walk in a new direction, to set our sights on a new horizon, to become a new person. John is calling us to a new life that begins with a fundamental change within the human spirit and flows out into a new quality of life. Therefore John says, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." An internal change of heart will lead to changes in our relationships with others and in the way we conduct our lives. You cannot say "yes" to Jesus and keep on taking your husband or wife for granted. You cannot say "yes" to Jesus and cheat the government. You cannot say "yes" to Jesus and betray your friends. You cannot say "yes" to Jesus and hate people who are different from you. You cannot say "yes" to Jesus and think about nothing more than satisfying your wants and desires.

More than anything else, we want to change. We want to be new people. We want to lay aside those things that we have done, and continue to do, that hurt others. We want to love our children well, practice generosity to those in need, and learn how to control our tempers. We want to be closer to the Lord. How can we do what we have tried to do a thousand times, and failed as many times as we have succeeded? We have heard it all before. We doubt the possibility of lasting change. We wonder how we will become kinder people, more patient friends, a more compassionate community, a more loving church. The message of John sounds like the thousand little messages we play in our heads urging us to do more or to be better. We are worn out by all the "ought-tos," "shoulds" and "musts."

We have read all the self-help books from the grocery store shelf we care to read. We still feel like the same old person inside. We are just as disorganized, arbitrary, unsuccessful and out of touch with our inner child as we have ever been. We have reduced the great good news of John to programs and petty moralisms. We feel powerless to do anything because we do not understand the reality upon which the word rests. John calls us to repent because something has happened to change our situation. Something has happened that creates a new possibility for us. "The kingdom of heaven has come upon us." Or, as another translation has it: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." God has acted to change some things.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of what God was going to do to change things. The people of Israel had given up hoping for any change for the better. The once proud people symbolized by the noble lineage of Jesse, the father of King David, had been humiliated time and again. From all appearance, Israel was little more than a broken down, hollowed out dead stump of a tree. From the stump of Jesse, God would cause a new green and living shoot to spring forth. God would act to change things. God did act in sending Jesus out of the root of Jesse to be our Savior. Our hope as Christians is not found in our own ability or capacity to change, but in God's power to change us.

God gives us the grace to change us from the inside out. The Holy Spirit makes what once seemed impossible now possible. You and I could try to push a two ton granite rock up a hill all day long and never get anywhere. No matter how hard we push we don't have the capacity to do it. Unless someone comes along who has enough strength or has the right equipment to move that rock, it is not going anywhere no matter how hard we try. In Jesus Christ, the Lord has come to set us free from the power of sin and give us the spiritual power to live new lives. He rules in righteousness and faithfulness. He brings peace to our troubled hearts.

Frederick Beuchner understands this dynamic of repentance. He writes, "To repent is to come to our senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry', than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'" It's time to get ready for Christmas. It's time to make a choice. It is time to say, "Wow!" It is time to "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come upon us." When we hear the prophet speak to us in the wilderness of our lives, in those places where Christ does not yet rule, what are we going to do? I believe you and I are going to change so that we might live in the kingdom and know the power of his love.

This fall I received a beautiful gift. It was an autographed copy of a book written by the son of dear friends who were neighbors and members of the church I served in Columbia. The author is Dr. Clif Cleaveland, a Rhodes Scholar and physician who is a past president of the American College of Physicians. In the book he describes the lives of seemingly ordinary men and women who met the challenges of their times to become, as the title of the book suggests, *Healers and Heroes*.

He tells of a friend named James Towns who grew up at the same time in the same small Georgia town as he did. Their experiences were totally different. Clif Cleaveland grew up on the white side of the racial divide and Towns grew up on the black side. Cleaveland writes, "I had ready access to a municipal swimming pool, a public library, and a cinema. I was free to go wherever I pleased in the business district and white residential neighborhood. James Towns knew the same town as a place of unpaved streets, shabby housing, and no public amenities ... We have entirely different but surprisingly happy memories of our childhood and teen years ... In the summer of 2003, I asked him how he had sustained his gentle, good nature in a setting of rigid racial and economic segregation. He paused before replying, 'I had good

parents. They taught me never to let anger control me. If someone mistreated me, I was to pray for them.”

(p. 33)

We are not going to change by trying harder, but by welcoming Christ into our lives and allowing his love to change us. We have tried harder and look how we have failed. We are going to change by trusting more. He alone can “straighten the winding ways of our hearts.”

Our Christmas Benevolence program at Second Presbyterian Church engages so many of our hearts and hands working together to touch over 850 lives with the love of Christ. Yesterday the halls were filled with youth and adults moving boxes and preparing for our guests who will receive these gifts. Maybe one reason why Christmas Benevolence is such an important part of our preparations for Christmas is that it teaches us just how close the kingdom of God is. When we prepare for Christmas by helping our neighbor before we help ourselves, then we get a taste of what this nonsense prophet named John was talking about when he said, “God is able from these stones to raise up the children of Abraham.” Little did we know that those stones would be our hearts.