

**The 3rd Sunday of Advent (C)
Luke 3:10-18**

**On this the 3rd Sunday of Advent,
we return to our old friend John the Baptist.
Today we hear him addressing his listeners
in the first century and in our own century,
with a call to *“Repentance.”***

**But what is repentance,
and why do we have to focus our attention
on such a dark and introspective subject,
when everywhere around us
in the world seems to be all caught up in merrymaking?**

**Our streets and stores are festooned with Holiday decorations,
store shelves are chocked full of tempting treasures,
our neighborhood homes are resplendent
with twinkling lights,
and inflatable lawn decorations.**

**I’m sure all of us have all seen by now, those two yards on Main Street,
competing with one another for our attention.**

**And our social calendars are crammed full of holiday parties,
flowing not with milk and honey, but eggnog and *“Bud Lites’.*”**

So, today, we might be tempted to say to John
and to our Church Fathers who organized
our lectionary readings for Advent:

*“Give it a rest guys,
enough with this dark talk of repentance.
Could you please lighten up?
It’s almost Christmas, for Christ’s sake!”*

So, let’s be merry, deck the halls and all go caroling?

Yes, I understand the objection.

But perhaps old John has something here,

maybe he has a gift for us today,

even though it is wrapped in the rough paper of his preaching.

Now, back to my original question:

Just what is repentance?

Perhaps we have a different definition of that word

rattling around in our heads

than what poor old John had in mind when he called for it.

So, let's cut John and our lectionary some slack,
give them the benefit of the doubt for a while today,
and see if there is not some life-giving word for all of us here,
especially here in the middle
of December's frantic rush to Christmas.

So, what is repentance?

We might think of it as an act of sorrow, of penance,
the wearing of sackcloth and ashes,
and retreating from the world
into our own closets of soul-searching and self-sacrifice.

We may feel that it's only on Ash Wednesday and Lent
after Mardi Gras of course,

that repentance may invoke some images
of the sacrament of reconciliation for us,

or an old fashioned tent revival on some country road,

where sinners come forward to give themselves to Jesus in an *"altar call,"*

and cry as they sing along with the old spiritual hymn:

"Just as I am, Lord, just as I am."

And this is certainly one way to express repentance.

But hold on,

this is not really the image of repentance

John had in mind with his preaching.

Just listen to the answer John gives us in our gospel today

when the crowds ask him the same question we are asking today:

What is repentance, what does it look like, and what does it demand?

John called the people, to prepare for the Lord's coming

by seeking and receiving the forgiveness God offers.

But was there more to it

than simply getting dunked in the River Jordan by him?

Of course there was, and they knew it.

Repentance is not the same as our sacred rite of Baptism.

His act alright will soak us through and through,

but there is absolutely no guarantee that

getting drenched will change us through and through.

Getting all wet is not the same as getting better.

So repentance is more than just the physical act of baptism,
as if getting half drowned by John in the River Jordan
is some sort of magic formula for eternal life,
like the ancient myth of Achilles' mother
dipping him in the River Styx,
in an effort to give him immortality.

The sign of repentance, according to John
is not the sacred rite of baptism,
it's not a pledge to attend Mass every Sunday,
it is not a commitment to tithe either,
and it's not a set of prayers
or a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

All these things are great
and they have a place in the life of a believer,
but they are not what John gives as an answer to his listeners.

Here is what John answered.

**Repentance is an inward decision,
it's a turn toward the spiritual dimension
of God's Kingdom alright,
but repentance shows itself,
works itself out, in concrete acts of mercy
and generosity toward humanity.**

**Repentance does not draw us away from the world
to hide in the cave of our own reflection and introspection,
rather it draws us outside ourselves
into the world to make a real difference
in the name of God.**

**And in this sense, repentance may have a fresh-washed face
rather than an ashen countenance
and the folded hands of prayer.**

Repentance creates bold and resilient witness

**to God's forgiving and saving character.
Repentance sends missionaries into that broken world out there,
where actions speak louder than words.**

So, how does John illustrate repentance?

**Just listen to his answer to three groups of would-be-disciples
who ask what repentance might look like:**

**First, John challenges them to open their hearts and hands,
their closets and their pantries, to their neighbors.**

Repentance is joyous generosity.

**Rather than complain about how poor they felt,
John calls them to realize just how blessed they were
compared to the poorest around them.**

**If they had more clothes than they could possibly ever wear
or more food than they could possible eat in one day,**

**John challenged them to experience repentance
by generously giving of their abundance,
just as God has so generously given to them.**

**It's amazing how the simple act of generosity
can change one's perspective about his or her possessions.
Just watch a documentary on a third-world country,
see their poverty but notice their generosity,
then share some of your packed closets
with clothes you hardly ever wear,
share some of your well stocked pantries and refrigerators
with food that often goes bad before we can eat it.**