

**Prepare to Meet Your God, 2**  
**Repent!**

*Matthew 3: 1 – 12*

I hope I will always remember the first backpacking excursion that I took with my son, Brian. I can't remember exactly how old he was, but you'll get the picture when I tell you this: his 'pack' was a book bag containing a set of pajamas, a book (of course – he's *my* son!), and a stuffed Teddy Bear named "Tommy". And Brian insisted that Tommy not be locked inside the bag, it was very important to him that Tommy's head poked out of the top of the pack, so that he could ... breathe. So, Brian was pretty young!

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It was to be a late spring trip, but we started planning it the winter before. I remember looking at maps with him in the kitchen of our Swedesboro parsonage... explaining that these lines means there are mountains that we'll have to climb up (and down), and showing him how to locate a possible campsite – one that is flat enough, and has access to a water source.

So the week arrived, and we drove out to an area around "Greenwood Furnace" in central PA with another family. We set up camp in a campground there, and spent a couple days exploring a bit... and then the day came when Brian and I were going to set out for the backcountry. It was an exciting time, (as it still is!) when the final things are put into the pack, and you heave that heavy thing up on your back and take off. I was carrying most of the weight, obviously, but I was younger then! And we set off.

\*\* But we had only walked for about an hour when I began to realize that my map – which I had ordered from a local trail club months before – was hopelessly out of date! The trail we were following was poorly blazed, and at times we would lose it completely. But when we emerged into a huge area that had been recently logged, I knew we were in trouble. I don't know if you've ever seen an area that has been 'clear cut', but that description is a bit misleading.

A clear cut is 'cleared' of all big trees, for sure, but the ground is anything *but* clear. It is covered with cut branches (some very large limbs) in a tangled mess, with stumps, brush piles and such everywhere – and quite of bit of it gets hidden by the weeds and ferns that spring up in the new found sunlight. So it is treacherous hiking, with scraped shins, twisted ankles, a lot of falling

**Prepare to Meet Your God, 2**  
**Repent!**

down, climbing over logs, and very slow. And this was a large, large, area of clear cut, with the chances of finding the already elusive trail on the other side... let's say, *slim* at best.

So, I explained to Brian what the deal was, and gave him an option – we could press on, bushwhacking, and hope that we come out where we expect to, (we were planning to meet up with another guy the next day), or, we could bag the whole thing, and try again tomorrow from a different direction. Well, Brian was at that wonderful (and scary) age where he thought that his dad actually knew what he was doing, and he said, enthusiastically, “Let's go on!”

So, we did.

\*\* And, to make a long story... a little longer... we stumbled, and evaded, and circled, and wandered around until we were out of the clear cut, and well into some state game lands... but I was having a growing feeling that I had no solid idea of where we were. I thought I might, but... we pressed on. The day grew to a close, and a very dark and threatening thunderstorm passed through. But, we kept moving. I finally stumbled upon a boundary line, where some surveyors had put orange ribbons in trees that made a straight line... and from that I made a guess as to where we were on my topo map. (And this is where I finally am going to get to a point!)

*If* my guess was right, then we needed to walk directly north from where we were standing. And we would then, eventually come upon a stream where we could camp, and from there, the next morning, it would be less than a mile walk to a road that would lead us into a part of the park where we could, hopefully, pick up a better marked trail.

That was the plan, then. Just go *north*. A very simple thing. So, with compass in hand, we started hiking north. Now, significantly for this story, north – *at least in the beginning* – was *uphill*. So, we trudged up... up... up.... And, of course, it had been a long, tiring day, the sun was down over the horizon by now, (still light, but no shadows) and those of you who hike will know what I mean when I tell you that your judgment gets a bit off the more tired you are.

\*\* At some point, the slope changed... it turned. Which means that North was no longer *uphill*, but it was *down*. But, in our tired state, I followed the ridge up. And when I eventually pulled out

**Prepare to Meet Your God, 2**  
**Repent!**

my compass, and checked our bearings, I stood there for a ridiculous amount of time, trying to figure out ... *why my compass was suddenly wrong!* See, it was telling me that I needed to go *that way*... but I *knew*... I knew – NO! – I needed to go *this way*. How could it be wrong? This is so weird!

Now, it's kind of embarrassing to share this, because it's going to kill my image as "Mr. Woodsman" (ha!) but I truly contemplated ignoring my compass, and continuing in the direction that my head and my heart was insisting was right. For a *long* time, I thought about it. Which way should I go?

But, I finally had a moment of sense, and I turned around. And, of course, the compass was right. And it turned out that we were almost exactly where I thought we were on the map, and the trip turned into an adventure that we still remember, not a disaster.

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We started an Advent sermon series last week called "Prepare to Meet Your God". As Advent is historically a time of preparation for the coming of the Messiah, we're going to be talking in this series about what we need to be doing in order to do that – to prepare for the Christ's coming. Last week we talked about what it means to be people who are 'keeping watch' for the return of Christ, as Jesus reminds us that 'we don't know either the day or the hour' of his coming, but we need to be ready, *looking*, watching, every day.

Today, we're going to focus on the preparation that John the Baptist called for, the preparation of "Repentance". In thinking about how I can best describe the meaning of repentance, I went back in my mind to that hiking trip with Brian so many years ago...

Here's the point...try to picture this: I'm standing there, on a mountainside, looking at a compass... I know that this instrument is trustworthy, it has never let me down. And it is telling me, clearly, the direction that I need to go. And yet my mind is resisting, it is fighting back; because I have my own plan – I have my *own* destination in mind – this is where my 'life' is going. I *know* how to get there.

**Prepare to Meet Your God, 2**  
**Repent!**

But I faced a moment of decision. And I decided. I decided that the stakes were too high to continue to insist on my own will... that I would submit to a greater authority. And that submission required me to *turn around*. To start walking in the *opposite direction*. Which is where we then, literally, found rest!

The word “repentance” in the Greek language means, “To change one’s mind”. *Metanoia*... The picture embedded in this word is a reversal of one’s thought, a change of direction. I’m walking in this direction and now I’m going the *other way*. *That* is repentance.

John the Baptist, a memorable character with his camel’s hair clothing, his diet of locusts and wild honey appears on the scene calling out: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*”. Once again, the prophecy of Isaiah is referenced, and as we saw last week that Jesus identified himself with the Agent of judgment in “The Day of the Lord”, so John is identified as the “*voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’*”

Don’t miss that point, my friends; what this reference is telling us, is that we prepare for the Lord’s coming through repentance. Now, we get a picture of what that means by looking at how the people of John’s day responded to this call:

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“<sup>5</sup>*People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*”

So, we can gather from this that at least one aspect of repentance was “Confessing their sins”. Once again, the root meaning of the biblical word “Confess” is very revealing, as we tend to have a lot of ideas about what this really means.

The Greek word is *homologeō*, a combination of two words: “Homo” meaning “the same”, and “Logos” which means, “word”. So *confess* means ‘the same word’, or, “to say the same thing”. Now, think about this, to confess our sins to God means then, means, literally that we “*say the same thing about them as God*”. Interesting, isn’t it?

**Prepare to Meet Your God, 2**  
**Repent!**

Confession is not the same thing then, as remorse... there may be remorse that comes with true confession – but then, again, that may not come until later. Feeling sorry for something does not necessarily mean that we've repented, or that we've even confessed that sin – in a Biblical sense. The important part of the concept of 'confession' is that we are 'agreeing with God' – that this particular act, this thing I did, these words that I said, this deed that I planned to do, or failed or refused to do... that was wrong *in God's eyes*. Maybe the world doesn't think so, maybe *I* don't, either... but that's not the point. (Remember the compass?)

This is important because you have to know, the world has some messed up theology when it comes to sin. I saw an article in the Sports section (of all places) in the Courier Post last week about a local High School football team (Paulsboro High School). They beat their rival Woodbury for the first time in three years on a Saturday game, and then, apparently, celebrated their victory at a party in which a video was made. And this video included profanity-laced taunts and disrespect for the losing team. And, of course, then someone posted it on YouTube.

The result was that something like 16 players were suspended for their Thanksgiving Game, which the team then lost, something like 42 – 0. But what I found interesting was the comment from one of their coaches, because he used some language that I seem to be hearing often in similar circumstances these days. He said something like this, "I think our players know that they made a *mistake*."

A *mistake*? Now, I am fairly proficient in the use of the English language. And I know that in one way of utilizing that word, 'mistake', it fits here. But I also know that the way we use the word popularly, and there, it comes up short. See, most people consider a mistake to be something that we do innocently – if I'm giving you directions to a place, and I say go 5 lights and turn right, but it is really 6 lights... that's a mistake. (Unless I was really trying to deceive you!)

When you are taking a test at school and you figure out a calculus problem, but you forget a crucial step, *that's* a mistake. But a deliberate choice to defame someone, a pre-mediated attack

## Prepare to Meet Your God, 2 Repent!

on the character of someone else, I'm sorry, that's not a mistake. That's a *sin*. Now, I'm not trying to pile on Paulsboro, for all I know, the players *did* see this as more than just a 'mistake'. But I'm using this as an example of us going to God with our *own* actions in mind...

In our prayers, we can say, "God, I make some mistakes today." Well, no doubt! But what do we mean by that? That we got caught? That we had no real choice – that our will had nothing to do with it? See "confession" means to say the same thing *as God*.

Whatever it is that we're bringing to God, we need to ask ourselves, what would *God* say about this? Not our friends, or our culture, or our parents... but God? (If we want to know that, we will know it! That's the 'job' of the Holy Spirit!) And when we agree with God, naming a deed for what it is, *then* we are confessing. And the scripture says, that "*when we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from every unrighteousness.*"

So, repentance begins with confession...

Another aspect of repentance is illustrated by John's strong response to a certain group of religious leaders who came for John's baptism (vs. 7):

*"When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."*

So, we confess our sins... and then we show by our actions that we meant what we said. We're going to talk over the next two weeks about the other side of repentance – i.e., we turn away from sin, but we turn *toward* God. But this is kind of a preview of where we're going – John says, "Don't just talk the talk... produce fruit." Live the life. Don't think that the faith of your parents, or your church membership, or your string of Sunday School attendance pins means anything in the bigger picture. "A tree is known by its fruit", Jesus said.

Finally, A third aspect of Repentance is found in verses 11 – 12:

*I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His*

**Prepare to Meet Your God, 2**  
**Repent!**

*winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”*

This again, is something that we'll be talking about in the next few weeks (and on Christmas Eve). Remember what we've seen so far: repentance includes

- 1. Changing Our Mind/ Direction**
- 2. Confession of our Sins**
- 3. Producing Fruit**

and here is #4

**4. Living in the Power of the Holy Spirit**

The apostle Paul, in Romans 8 adds this:

<sup>5</sup> *Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.*

<sup>6</sup> *The mind controlled by the sinful nature is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> The sinful mind is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.*

<sup>8</sup> *Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*

<sup>9</sup> *You, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature but are in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.*

The author, Anne Lamott, summed this whole concept up perfectly when she said, “God can't clean the house of you when you're still in it.”<sup>1</sup>

Change our thinking, confess our sins, produce fruit – a life that shows we're serious, and live in the Power of the Spirit. Then, we're ready for the Coming of our Messiah!

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<sup>1</sup> *Anne Lamott, Grace Eventually (Riverhead Trade, 2008), p. 235*