

## STOP, REPENT, AND CHANGE

The Second Sunday of Advent

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December 6, 2020

The first formula for prayer that I remember learning in my life – sometime in my early Sunday School years – was “A.C.T.S.” – adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. It was taught to me so simply and well that it usually still presents itself as I begin to pray. In the spirit of Advent as a time of personal inventory, I will tell on myself a bit today: I have long noticed that I tend to do more of A, T, and S than I do of C. Think about the four for yourself – do you have an area or two that are less strong than the others?

If you're with me and tend to be weaker in the confession department than in the other aspects of prayer, today is the Sunday for you. On this Second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist and his “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4) is front and center. John's task is the Advent task: to prepare us to encounter Jesus. John's preaching is that, before we can receive Jesus' more powerful baptism with the Holy Spirit, we must confess our sins, turn from them, and be forgiven.

I think that one reason I have sometimes struggled to give confession its proper due is that confession is only meaningful if it comes from a place of remorse or contrition about something one ought to feel remorseful about. Over many years of practice as a psychotherapist, I have noticed how often those I work with struggle with what I would call inappropriate guilt. I'm quite attuned to feelings of inappropriate guilt because I've struggled with them myself. Let me give some examples: taking proper care of oneself is not something to feel guilty about; expressing anger in a healthy and respectful way is not something to feel guilty about; speaking the truth in love is not something to feel guilty about; human sexuality is not something to feel guilty about. I expect that most of us could add to this list. It is very worth thinking about: what were you taught to think of as behaviors to feel guilty about that were actually healthy behaviors? God does not seek our repentance for these things.

God is interested in honesty about our hearts and what we have been unwilling to acknowledge about ourselves. As the biblical commentator Darrell Bock points out about John's baptism of repentance, “Making straight paths for God before his program comes involved a change of heart about one's way of life.” (Darrell Bock, *Mark*, p. 111) **A change of heart about one's way of life** – a *turning* – this is what God is interested in. For John the Baptist, this turning, this changed way of life, was a necessary step before the *eschaton* could come – the conclusion of God's divine plan, the coming of God's kingdom of justice, kindness, and righteousness.

On this Second Sunday in Advent, we are invited to stop and reflect on the truth that the repentance that John called for and said was necessary *before* the transformation of the world has in a very real sense not taken place. Yes, the pandemic has stopped us and challenged us to look at our way of life. But will we change? Can we change?

Back to telling on myself and see if you identify. If I am to make the kind of confession John the Baptist cries out for me to make, I need to confess that I knew about environmental degradation as a teenager. Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962, warning about the dangers of pesticides. Frances Moore Lappe wrote *Diet for a Small Planet* in 1971, warning that the land use necessary for the factory farming of animals posed a direct threat to the environment and to the adequate nourishment of the poor around the world. I knew about internalized white racism as a teenager, too. James Baldwin wrote *Notes of a Native Son* in 1955, and *The Fire Next Time* in 1963: prophetic

voices like his were describing and condemning white racism and the legacy of slavery in ways that resonated loudly throughout the 1960s and 1970s. I could go on and on here. I knew. I would dare to say that *we* knew. And what I must confess is that I did not *turn*. Sure, I lived in a vegetarian co-op during my years at an expensive private college, but the life I have lived as an adult—my *way of life*—has not reflected things I have long known to be true about the sickness of our world and the ways I contribute directly to it.

It's human nature. Real change – real repentance – real turning – is hard for us. Again, the pandemic is illuminating things we have known for a long time, and it is forcing some changes in our way of life for the moment. But here's the thing now, and we are going to have to keep repeating it: **we can't just go back to the way things were before.** Not because it won't be possible: the pandemic will end, seemingly sooner than we might have expected, and the wheels of industry are eager for us to move about and spend and consume as we did before. The structures of white supremacy have not been shaken enough to meaningfully address the prejudices and disparities of our society – things can continue as they were. But we in the church are called to *turn*, not to simply revert. Perhaps for a time we need to move John the Baptist front and center on a regular basis: the one who says stop, repent, and change. We humans have not been good at this. Let us in the church seek to make it a discipline to carry forward the changes the pandemic has imposed and to build on them. It would be a new thing for humans to do that. But before the One who makes all things new comes, we must do nothing less.