

Advent Sermon Matthew 3:1-12 Advent2A16

This message is rated M for Mature audiences, and R for Repentant audiences. No, don't send your children out. This has nothing to do with age. In fact, the very youngest might be more mature in their willingness to Repent. I'll get back to that later. First I want to share some thoughts from seminary professor Jeffrey A. Oschwald. They challenge us to think about how we dress up the characters of Christmas into people who would less likely challenge us to have an attitude of mature repentance.

One of them, Bishop Nicholas of Myra, is remembered on December 6. Orphaned at a young age, he inherited a modest fortune. Before he became a bishop, one night he threw three bags of gold through a window of a destitute family who found them the next morning. Tales began of the generous St. Nicholas dispensing gifts at midnight.

Santa Claus, derived from this historical figure, is a far cry from the humble Nicholas. He did nightly errands for charity, converted his church into a clinic during a plague, during a famine ate only after everyone else had food, and was imprisoned for protesting injustices against the poor.

It takes some considerable dressing up to fit this saint into our modern celebrations of Christmas. Old Nick is less an example of a mature humble hero than a kindly old gent whose greatest challenge to us is to be good for a season and come up with a list of stuff we want.

A bigger dress-up task is fitting John the Baptist into Christmas holidays. If someone came to our Christmas party asking for locust appetizers and smelling like a camel, we might hastily direct him to the nearest Salvation Army station. Or we might tolerate him, until he started preaching repentance. He wouldn't bother with a naughty and nice list and tell you which one you're on. He would tell us the truth: We are all on the naughty list, and we need to change the way we think and act. If he called the religious leaders hypocrites and snakes, he wouldn't hesitate to call us out on our failings. Would he not also create in us some anxious self-examination?

Luke's account has him telling the penitents that bearing the fruit of repentance meant being content, honest, and generous. It wasn't just saying, "I'm sorry" but changing your behavior inside out. The call for repentance can be heeded by mature audiences only.

John came at a time people expected the Messiah to come--any decade or day, but soon. So they were ready to receive John as the one prophesied by Isaiah, the voice of the one crying in the wilderness. They were ready for this fiery preacher to shake things up. But he was only an opening for the main act.

For years Rod Roddy called out names in the audience to "Come on down" and be the first contestants in the Price is Right. Having attended the show in person, Cheryl and I heard the producers interview those of us standing in line outside the studio. Those who get called down are the ones who are all in, not holding back their enthusiasm. With the contestants ready, Rod would announce the main character, the emcee Bob Barker. Rod would later describe prizes, but Bob ran the show.

John preached the law and called people down to repent and be forgiven in water baptism. But the prize for that repentance came through the one he announced. The real fiery preacher of Advent is Jesus. He would baptize not with water only, but with the Spirit and with fire. The winnowing fork is in hand, ready to separate the penitent from the pretenders.

Now there's a dress up challenge for you. How do we get this Advent Jesus coming in judgement to look like the meek and mild Jesus in the manger who seeks nothing from us? The world loves to **pause** for a season to focus on the convenient Christ, the safe Savior, the lenient Lord, who once a year shows up in celebrations to make us forget our problems for a while. Yet the church is giving them, or should be giving them, the fiery preacher who calls for repentance as his announcer John did.

To do that we Christians need first to be less comfortable with our own lackluster obedience and more receptive of Christ's baptism of Spirit and Fire. But we can only do that if we have been through the fire of repentance and purification. John the apostle proclaimed that, upon our repentance, Jesus will forgive us and cleanse us of all sin. By His spirit he works in us faith in Christ as one who has gone through the baptism of fire for us on the cross. The Spirit that brings us to faith also creates the desire to live a changed life.

This is not something we can do on our own. Living a life rated R for repentance means we need to have a faith rated M for mature. That means, ironically, we need to be more like children. Repenting and turning our life around requires facing the truth that we cannot do this without God's power and mercy. That's hard for adults to admit, since

we get used to thinking we have life under control.

But the promise of forgiveness and life is there for us to receive through Christ, if we are mature enough to repent. May God grant us His Spirit to give us true repentance. Amen.