

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
December 7, 2008 – Advent II  
Isaiah 64: 4-9; Mark 1:1-8  
“Repent”

The little brother kicks the big brother’s feet under the table. The big brother slugs the little brother on the shoulder. The little brother swings at the big brother’s head and knocks his eyeglasses off. The big brother punches the little brother in the nose. The little brother jumps up from the table, spills his glass of milk, and runs crying into the bathroom. The blood from his nose has ruined the new white shirt he was going to wear to church that night for the Christmas Eve service.

When all the commotion dies down, the parents look sternly at their sons and order them to apologize for hitting each other. With glaring eyes and pouting mouths, the two brothers look at each other and issue their one-word apologies: “Sorry.”

Well, this is not what it means to repent. Repentance is not the same as saying we’re sorry. Repentance isn’t the same as confession, either. We apologize and confess fairly routinely. Of course we try to be more sincere than those two brothers, but not always. Haven’t you ever apologized without really meaning it? Or prayed a lip-service only confession?

So, what’s different about repentance? Repentance means, literally, to change directions. To turn away from our sin and turn to God. It’s an active thing. We’re heading in one direction – we stop – we turn around – and head in a new direction. And the road we’re looking for is that highway of God in the wilderness of our lives, that straight path that leads us to the Lord.

So we're taking some time in our Advent season to slow down just a little today. Because it's hard to repent on the run or in a hurry. Repentance means stopping a while and looking at our lives as they really are, noticing where our lives are God-directed and where they're not.

This inner dimension of repentance requires us to be introspective. And that really is an individual, unique thing. Being God-directed in our lives looks and feels differently for each one of us. There is no such thing as generic holiness. There is no abstract Christian life we all can copy. No -- there is your Christian life, and your Christian life, and my Christian life, and your Christian life, and so on. For when Christ came and dwelt among us, that wasn't generic or abstract, and it still isn't. God in Christ comes into our specific, particular lives, and he changes them, yes, but he changes them according to those specifics and particulars. For each of us has our own story, our own circumstances, our own limitations, our own desires, our own needs, and Christ enters our lives as they are and through his grace works his mystery of transformation. But we are still ourselves. A God-directed Eric Skinner isn't the same as a God-directed Lyndon Steele. A transformed Mauri Feemster doesn't look or act or live just like a transformed Thea Wilson. The power of God to transform us is the same. The love of God for us is the same. But how that power and love get worked out in our lives is a new miracle for each of us. We aren't generic Christians. So each of us has to know our own selves inside and out. Therefore to participate in this Advent process of repenting, of turning around and making straight the paths that lead to God, we have to be rooted in our own truths. Where do things stand for me? How am I living out my faith? How am I not? Where am I on the straight path? Where have I taken a detour?

Listen to an excerpt from an old, old Advent sermon by Francis de Sales, written and delivered in the year 1620:

“St. John gives us some particulars in today’s Gospel. Make straight the way of the Lord, fill up the valleys, lower the mountains and hills.....Our life too contains many hills, valleys and torturous ways which can be put right only by penitence. Penitence fills up the valleys, lays low the mountains, makes straight and smoothes the ways. Do penance, says St. John; lower those mountains of pride, fill up those valleys, those ditches of lukewarmness and tepidity. The valleys which the glorious St. John wants us to fill up are none other than fear which, when it is excessive, leads to discouragement at the sight of our sins. Fill up the valleys; that is, fill your heart with confidence and hope because salvation is near at hand” (quoted in The Vigil, by Wendy Wright, p. 40).

Pride, lukewarmness, fear, discouragement – those are the inner dispositions de Sales points out as needing our attention at this time of year. And those are good places for us to begin. But again, each of us needs to examine our own habits of the heart and answer for ourselves whether our hearts are God-centered or self-centered, whether our lives are headed toward God or away from God.

And so what better way for us to do this during our Advent season than by coming to the Lord’s table for communion? We will come individually – and take into our own hands the bread of our life and the cup of our salvation. Hear the words again today, but hear them as if for the first time:

“The body of Christ broken for you.”

“The blood of Christ shed for you.”

God does not love us in general. Jesus Christ did not die for human sinfulness in the abstract. God loves you – as the you you are. God loves me, as the me I am.

We are specific, particular people. Our repentance means knowing who we are and where we stand. But it also means turning ourselves away from sin and heading to God. The Advent highway runs both directions. God is coming to us. That is the ancient promise. God is coming. But will we meet him? Will we see him? If we are on the same highway, we will. If we are on the path that runs straight to him.

So we come forward to the Lord's table. What then? We receive the gifts of love and assurance of salvation and pardon. What then? Well, again our action is wonderfully symbolic. We come forward. We stop awhile. And then we turn around. We go back to our seats. We go home. But to live how?

Well, repentance has an outer dimension, too. It's more than owning up to the truths of our lives. It means changing what needs to be changed. It means getting off the crooked path and getting on the straight path. It means living as people who have indeed received the bread of life and the cup of salvation. There's no standard script to follow. Our lives aren't staged for us. But somehow our repentance should show. Here's one man's story of repentance:

Roy was a housepainter. He scoffed at God, lived a life that deprived his family of the very necessities of life and seemed not to care. Had it not been for the little community church feeding his family and providing shoes and clothing for his children, no one knows what would have happened. Many people tried to help Roy get his life straightened out, but they were met with hostility and rejection. Then, as Roy tells it himself:

One day I woke up at the bottom of what seemed like a deep pit. I knew I couldn't get out by myself and didn't know anyone who would help me. I had run everybody who cared about me out of my life. For the first time since I was a little boy, I prayed to God for help. That day I knew that I would have to leave my old sinful life behind if anything good was ever going to happen. I asked God to give me the strength to do it and

started the hardest climb I have ever taken. In church the next Sunday, I met Christ and asked him to give me a new life, and he did. Some folks don't think it will last or will make a difference, but they are wrong. Since that day I have paid the rent and provided a roof for my family. Money I once spent on booze and gambling and all that goes along with kind of life is now spent on food for my family, shoes for their feet, and other necessary things they need. Now I am home every night with the people who loved me, even when I wasn't fit to be loved. I am blessed. I once had no hope, but God heard my cry in my darkest moments and answered me with hope and with Christ who showed me how to live a new life" (The Minister's Manual 2008, Lee McGlone, editor, p. 328).

So somehow our repentance should show. In how we live and how we love. In what we do. In the choices we make. In the words we speak. In how we treat each other. In our politics and in our economics. In our families. At our work. In our playing and in our praying. Somehow our lives should reflect the transforming and guiding light of Jesus Christ, who is, we trust with our Advent hearts, the hope of all the world, the hope of all the world.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

"Repent and believe in the good news."

Amen.