

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79, Philipians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6
The Joy of Repentance

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; ³and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:2-3, RSV)

My title for this sermon is “The Joy of Repentance.” It is a strange combination of words, I admit. We rightly associate repentance with heartfelt sorrow for sin and with regret for what we have done. Such sorrow for sin is lovely and praiseworthy. Sorrow for sin. And yet, there is a kind of joy in repenting. Indeed, we human beings are never more glorious than when we are turning life around and mending our ways. Stars and planets, lions and bears, flowers and trees: all kinds of God’s good creatures *cannot* repent. But you and I can! God has granted us *freedom* to do so.

If we would enter the Kingdom of God, the Bible leads us first through the land of repentance. All four gospels are united in this sequence. Before we get to the ministry of Jesus, we first hear the penitential call of John the Baptist (that handsome fellow there on our Advent banner).

ANCIENT BAPTISMS

We find the same sequence in the Sacrament of Baptism. For the one being baptized, there are two parts to the sacrament: the renunciation of sin *and* the turning to Christ. In the ancient church, the two parts were made visible by the very posture of those being baptized. I love to imagine it. Baptisms were saved up and celebrated in one big group at the Easter Vigil. For the renunciation of sin part of the baptism, the candidates would stand, face west (Ahh, the west! That’s where the sunshine fades and the darkness comes), shake their fists, and shout out, “Satan, I reject you, and all your false ways and all your false promises!” Then, the candidates would rotate, face east (where the light arises), and cheerfully say something like this: “Jesus Christ, I turn to you. I give myself to you.” Two steps: renunciation of sin, and turning toward Christ. These two steps should occupy us each day, henceforth, for the remainder of life. We should never give up on them. Advent especially invites us to practice the first step of the two-step dance: the forsaking of sin.

THE 95 THESES

It was not long ago that we celebrated Reformation Sunday. That Sunday marks the posting of Martin Luther's *95 Theses* back on October 31, 1517. He nailed them to a church door—the door of what was called “The Castle Church” in Wittenberg, Germany. There were two main churches in Wittenberg in Luther's Day: All Saints Church (also called the Castle Church) and St. Mary's Church (also called the Town Church). When Wittenberg University was established in 1502, the Castle Church was annexed to serve as the chapel to the University.¹ What Luther did in nailing his *95 Theses* to the church door was not unusual. It was the normal way for university professors and students to post things, like a posting on a bulletin board. Luther wrote his Theses in Latin, inviting scholarly discussion of them with other faculty in the university.

When you hear the title “95 Theses,” it is naturally to think that Luther had prepared ninety-five themes he wanted to discuss. But that is not the case here. We do not have ninety-five themes, but rather one theme, with ninety-four meditations developing that one theme. So, you can quickly get the heart of the matter of this great document by reading Thesis One. It goes this way:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Matt. 4:17], he willed *the entire life* of believers to be one of repentance.

The formal title of Luther's *95 Theses* is *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*. He posted his Theses because he was so very troubled by the sale of indulgences in those days. Many thoughtful priests and theologians were also troubled by those sales. The history and the theology of indulgences is complex, but in general, the whole phenomenon of indulgences was prone to abuse, and they were abused in Luther's day. I think that both Catholics and Lutherans could say that.

Judging by his *95 Theses*, the fundamental problem with the sale of indulgences is that it cut the heartstrings of repentance. It substituted a single deed—the obtaining of an indulgence slip—for what was meant to be a lifetime of repentance.

Notice that Luther's First Thesis is not about thieves or murderers or pirates, but about “believers.”

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Saints'_Church,_Wittenberg

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of *believers* to be one of repentance.

In his *95 Thesis* Luther is standing up for a certain stance to the soul of the Christian. He wants no relaxation or escape from the call of Jesus to repent, take up our cross, and follow him.

Luther continues with this high spiritual theme twelve years later when he writes his *Small Catechism*. When he is explaining the meaning of Baptism for daily life, he again sings his song in favor of daily repentance:

What does such baptizing with water signify?

Answer: It signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by *daily* sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God’s presence.

JOHN AND JESUS BOTH CRY REPENT!

You have heard about the preaching of John the Baptist. Our Gospel Lesson calls it a “baptism of repentance”:

...he [John] went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

So, that is John the Baptist. He cries aloud “Repent.”

It turns out Jesus does the same thing. Listen to a summary passage introducing the ministry of Jesus. This comes from St. Mark, Chapter One:

¹⁴Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, ¹⁵And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: *repent ye*, and believe the gospel. (Mark 1:14-15, KJV)

John and Jesus both cry “Repent.” There is a difference between them, which I mean to finish this sermon with, but before that, let us note that both John and Jesus cry for repentance.

And how could they not? Would we really want them to forsake the call that we should become better people than we are at present? I think not.

FREEDOM

In a way, we are most *human* when we repent. Sticks and stones can't do it. But you and I can. Why? Because our Maker has endowed us with *freedom*, and the call to repent honors this high gift within us. John and Jesus never give up on calling us to repent because they never despair that we can! Nor should we despair of it.

And so, that sin that clings so close to us: we can turn away from it and leave it behind. We can be rude to sin, for it has long been rude to us. The damage we have done to our own bodies, to our own minds and spirits, and the damage we have done to others: we can stop doing that harm, turn things around, and at least make a start on beginning to repair things.

So, at first glance, “repent” is a hard word. But we are human beings, with God-given freedom, and so we are capable of this good work. “Repentance” is a word swept along by divine winds. The call to repentance means that God has not given up on us, that he honors our freedom to choose the good, and he wants us to do it.

JESUS DECEIVES NO ONE.

When Jesus says “Repent ye,” it is a blessed call that includes you and me and everyone who hears it:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

Jesus deceives no soul on the face of this earth. Jesus speaks to you and me through the Bible, through the liturgy, and through preaching in his name. He calls us to repent, and he excludes no one at all.

JESUS IS BETTER THAN JOHN

I end with a happy distinction between John the Baptist and Jesus. John could call people to repentance, and he did. He was very good at it. In that way, he helped people to prepare for the coming of God's kingdom. But Jesus could do more than that. He could do both parts of that two-step dance I described when talking about ancient baptisms. Jesus could both call us to turn to the west, shake our fists, and renounce sin, death, and the devil, and then, when we turn around to face east, he is there to greet us! That was what he was like. He did not simply prepare folks for the kingdom: he brought them into it, many of

them right then and there. So, he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, raised the dead, welcomed sinners, and forgave sins.

What this means for you and me is that whenever you hear the voice of Jesus calling you to repent, you can confidently turn to it. For when you turn from sin, you will not be then staring into a blank wall, but will be moving closer to Jesus, who will give you strength for your good efforts, who will be grateful for your improvements, and who will welcome you into heaven someday, through his grace and merits, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.