

December 8, 2024  
2 Advent  
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### **Moving from Regret to Repentance**

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. Malachi 3:1-4

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Luke 3:1-6

I was born in 1963, a fact that either makes me young in some of your eyes, or really old to the Millennials of Gen Z's present this morning. My generation grew up in the era of classic TV game shows: we're talking Match Game, Let's Make a Deal, To Tell the Truth, among countless others. But my favorites were the word association games like Password and the \$10,000 Pyramid – which because of the inflation of the 1970's became the \$25,000 and later the \$100,000 pyramid. The premise was the same. One person would say a word or clue, and the other contestant would have to guess the one-word answer. If I said 'Plymouth' I would hope that the other person might guess 'rock.' Plymouth Rock. Or if I said 'Abe' I would hope the guess might be 'Honest.' Honest Abe.

If we were to play Advent word association, we have plenty of word clues at the ready. We could start with the four candles we light each week: hope, peace, joy and love.

Peace is our word for today. Peace is often on our minds and hearts leading up to Christmas. Over the centuries, even warring armies would put down their arms and ceased fighting to honor the birth of Christ. From the prophet Isaiah we hear this hope for a Messiah: For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (9:6)

Most of us would probably have heard the Hebrew word for peace: *shalom*. What might be the clues to guess the word 'peace' if we were playing Advent Password or Pyramid?

What if the contestant said: complete or whole. Or: a wall with no cracks (from The Bible Project). Or: to restore or heal what has been broken? The correct answer of course would be shalom: peace.

The kind of peace we are talking about is about more than an absence of conflict, like a declaration of peace at the end of a war. It is about action and movement. It is an active process of making and bringing about wholeness and healing. It makes you and me agents and makers of peace.

Here's another word for Advent Password. The clue is 'repentance.' We arrive at repentance via John the Baptist, who always takes center stage in this season long before we journey with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. It is John who proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

'Repentance' or 'repent.' Among the right answers: to turn; to turn back around, to make a course correction, to return, a turning point.

I've always loved that simple Shaker hymn 'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free.' It ends with: "When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed, to turn, to turn, will be our delight till by turning, turning we come round right.' Repentance. To come round right.

There are of course stumbling blocks to repentance.

There is a reason we try to name or list the things that we want to turn away from or correct. We pray on most Sundays what is called a general confession: we confess to God what have done and by what we have left undone: We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. I almost wish we would pause after each line so that we could think more deeply about each phrase rather than race through them.

Regret is a stumbling block to repentance when it takes hold of us and won't let go.

Regret is a powerful emotion. To feel guilty about something. Looking over our lives and actions and wondering if we did enough, were present enough, could have done better.

As a parent I have wrestled with the powerful pull of regret. I worried about this more than I should have when my now adult children were young. Like many starting out in a new occupation or career, my work in the parish filled many days, evenings meetings and weekends. I felt I had much to prove – I was ordained at the age of 28 -- which kept me at church more than I wanted. An alarm bell went off at some point when my family changed the words of the nursery rhyme tune: 'Muffin man.'

“Do you know the muffin man?  
The muffin man, the muffin man.  
Do you know the muffin man  
Who lives in Drury Lane?”

I knew that my work life was out of balance when my family swapped out the word ‘muffin’ for ‘meeting.’ They changed the words and sang to me: “do you know the meeting man.” It was time to adjust and make a change.

In the reflections at the beginning of your service bulletin, we hear about the last book in the Old Testament. The first reading is from the book of the prophet Malachi. To a people who have become careless about their practice of their faith, the prophet brings the word of God that God’s messenger is coming.

The people who God led back to Jerusalem after the long exile to rebuild their lives, were backsliding and forgetting. This was the fertile ground for the promise of a Messiah to arrive on the scene to fully make known God’s love.

I paused over the word ‘careless.’

When we are given something or someone to love and care for, what do we do. We ask often: are we being good stewards of what we have been given and share in common. God’s good creation. Our families and friendships. Our bodies and health. Our worshipping communities. The moral fabric of our nation and our world.

There is a scene from the 1991 movie “Hook” that has long stayed with me. It is an updated version of Peter Pan starring Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman. Peter Pan is all grown up and works as a corporate executive. He is now so busy that he has forgotten about Never neverland – so focused was he on climbing the ladder of success.

At one point, his wife Moira tries to warn Peter that he was living his life in a way that he would regret later. She told him: “Your children love you. They want to play with you. How long do you think that lasts? Soon your son may not even want you to come to his games. We have a few special years with our children, when they’re the ones who want us around. After that, you’re going to be running after them for a bit of attention. It’s so fast Peter. It’s only a few years and it’s over. And you’re not being careful, and you are missing it.”

“You’re not being careful” are the words that I most remember.

When we are careless, regret has a way of taking up precious real estate in our lives.

There was a study of people over the age of 95 conducted by a Baptist minister. All of the participants were asked: if you had life to do over again, what would you do differently? Their responses fell into three major categories.

First: reflect more. Spend more time considering who you are, what you are here for, what God is calling you to become. What makes life worth living.

Second: take more risks.

This is hard for me to hear because I am more a 'color within the lines' kind of person. Playing it safe, seems, well... safe. But as someone once said: Why climb out on a limb? That is where the fruit is. No limb-climbing, no fruit-picking.

What is the blessing that we use from time to time:

Life is short,  
 And we do not have much time  
 to gladden the hearts of those who  
 make the journey with us.  
 So... be swift to love,  
 and make haste to be kind.

Risk loving and trusting and believing.

Third, do more things that last forever. Invest in eternity. Make this world a better world because you sojourned here.

There is a Greek proverb that says it best: "A society grows great when old men plant trees, the shade of which they know they will never sit in."

We do a lot of seed planting in the church. We plant seeds of faith. We engage with people we may never see or talk to again. And we never know what God does with those encounters.

This we know: regret leads nowhere positive. The invitation John the Baptist made so long ago is still before us. Our work is to turn regret into true repentance. To believe that the wholeness and completeness of *shalom*, peace, in our lives is possible. Jesus said to his followers: My peace I give to you all. John 14:27

To turn, turn and come around right.

Our God does have a way, I believe, of filling in the valleys and low moments in our lives with hope. God can smooth out the rough ways before us – and yes even our rough edges.

Our burdens and the loads we carry around can be lifted and lessened when we open ourselves to hear these comforting words of Christ: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'

God can make those mountains before us seem less daunting if we trust, give thanks, breathe, and take one step at a time one day at a time.