

Sermon for Sunday, December 17, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"CHRISTMAS--ONE STEP BEYOND REPENTANCE"

St. Matthew 3:1-12

Text: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming, after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." St. Matthew 3:11

Our scripture for this morning begins with the words, "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" The word "repent" means, "to feel sorry for sin and seek forgiveness; to regret something done in the past and to ask forgiveness." Let me call your close attention to the two verbs that the dictionary associates with repentance in the definition I have just read. It speaks of seeking forgiveness, of asking forgiveness.

Now, I am going to ask you to do a very difficult thing, I am going to ask you to juggle several things in your mind at the same time. If you can manage to do it, I believe we can throw some fresh light on the meaning of Christmas. Fresh light can be very important. This is my 19th Christmas as an ordained minister to preach the Christmas season. Assuming that each time I have preached four Advent sermons plus a Christmas sermon, that means that I have preached about the meaning of Christmas some 95 times! Can you imagine talking about the same subject 95 different times? Believe me, some fresh light would be very welcome! It is with some chagrin that I confess to you this morning that the thoughts I have to share today are new to me. Or, to put it another way, the things I want to say this morning about Christmas are things I had never put together just this way before.

The first thing I want to share with you is that the proper attitude toward Christmas is repentance. Now, for some reason, I had never fully appreciated this before. Perhaps, I got misled by such hymns as "Joy to the World! the Lord is come" or by "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" or maybe by, "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen." These are hymns of joy, of delight, of gratitude, of happiness. But what I had never adequately realized is that the joy grows out of the heart of one who is burdened with repentance and suddenly finds himself forgiven. But go back and look at the opening of our scripture for this morning and listen to John the Baptist, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Could we spend a moment dissecting that sentence? First is the word, "repent." Now, we have already defined that as feeling sorry or regretting what we have done and consequently seeking and asking for forgiveness. But look at the phrase, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Perhaps it would help if we re-translated it. Perhaps it would be clearer if we said, "repent, for Jesus is about to come." So, the proper attitude toward Christmas--toward the coming of Jesus--is repentance.

Let's stop there for a moment. Everybody is pretty busy these days--if you don't believe it, try to get a parking place at one of the department stores! And what are we busy doing? Well, we are busy getting ready for Christmas. By that we mean we are busy decorating the house, planning parties and meals, buying presents, or planning trips to visit loved ones. But John the Baptist said the proper reparation for Christmas was repentance. The question I want to ask is this: If repentance is the proper preparation for Christmas, is anybody here ready for Christmas? Well, I know I'm not and I suspect you are not either.

Is there anything going on in your life this morning that you need to repent of? Are you proud of your relationship to your wife--or husband? Are you happy about the way you relate to your children? Are you pleased with your relationships to

your fellow workers--your neighbors? Are you proud of all the ways you act--the things you say, the thoughts you think? Would you be pleased this morning to stand before God and show him all the things that are in your heart--to show him the closets of your soul, the dark corners of your mind, the hidden crevices in your thoughts? Would you? Well, if you are as I am, you are not ready for that--you are not ready for Christmas. If you are as I am, what we both need is some repentance. And isn't that just what John the Baptist told us? He said, "Repent, for Jesus is about to come."

So, the first thing I want to share with you is that the proper attitude toward Christmas is repentance. The second thing I want to share with you is that my sermon is mistitled. Actually, the sermon properly should be titled, "Christmas-- Two Steps Beyond Repentance." Now, let me tell you why.

Let's look at the first step beyond repentance. Imagine that you have taken a sheet of paper and on it you have written all of the bad and evil things that you have thought or done or said for which you are deeply sorry and repentant. (And by the way, that might not be a bad preparation for Christmas!) What is the thing that you need most at that point? Is it not forgiveness? Now, that is something that Jesus can offer us that John the Baptist could not offer. John could come out of the wilderness and say "Repent, for Jesus is coming." And when the people asked him some of the things they could do, he could tell them how they could act better but there was one thing John the Baptist could not do, but only Jesus could do. For example, John could not say to a paralytic man, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." He could not say to a woman taken in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

So, Christmas means first of all forgiveness. God is breaking into the human arena in the person of Jesus in order to die for our sins. For example, St. Paul writes to the Colossians, "(God) has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:13,14) Or as Jesus himself said on the eve of his crucifixion as he instituted the Last Supper, "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 26:28)

Yes, the first step beyond repentance is forgiveness. That means that Christmas is above all for sinners--for people who know they have sinned and who are sorry for it. It is the sinner who most appreciates Christmas because first of all it brings him what he needs the most--forgiveness. And when a man who is repentant--who is sorry for his sins--knows that he is forgiven, he can sing "Joy to the World" and really mean it!

But it is precisely at this point that we discover that in Christmas there is a second step beyond repentance. Notice our text for this morning. John the Baptist says, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with"--with what? With forgiveness? With the coming of Jesus and his subsequent death on the cross for our sins, that is what we would expect, isn't it? But what does it say? It says, "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Now, isn't that interesting? The first step of forgiveness is assumed and John the Baptist is talking about some second step having to do with the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in the sermon I said I was going to ask you to juggle several things in your mind at the same time. Well, you haven't been juggling! But it is my fault, I forgot to tell you what to juggle. Remember when I began our sermon I read the dictionary definition of repentance and I said the definition spoke of seeking for--

givenness and asking forgiveness? Does "seeking" and "asking" bring a Bible passage to mind? Well, it is the 9th and 10th verse of the 11th chapter of St. Luke: "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." That's the passage, but do you remember how it ends? If a man asks, and seeks, and knocks what does he get? Forgiveness? No, listen to the ending of that passage, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Luke 11:13)

Well, if the first step beyond repentance is forgiveness, the second step has to do with the Holy Spirit. And what is the role, the function of the Holy Spirit? We found the answer in the first chapter of the Book of Acts, verse 8. Here is the situation. Jesus has been crucified, God has raised him from the dead and for forty days he has been with his disciples. He is with them for the last time. He has come to the moment when he will ascend to heaven to be with God forever. And when he is with his disciples for the last time, surely there were one or two things most heavy on his heart, at least one thing he wanted to say to those disciples. And what was one of those last things he said to them? It was this: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..." (Acts 1:8)

So, the proper preparation for Christmas is repentance. But Christmas goes two steps beyond that and gives us first, forgiveness; and second, the Holy Spirit which brings us power--spiritual power. But power to do what? Well, above all God wants to give you power to live a better life than you are living this morning. You see, God isn't satisfied with your life--not with the lives of any one of us! Christmas is God saying that he is willing to forgive us for very unsatisfactory lives. But Christmas is more than that--Christmas is God making available a new spiritual power to help us live better lives.

And isn't that what we both need--power to live better lives than we are living this morning? We are like the little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Not only do we need to be sorry we got caught with our hand in the jar, we need power to keep from putting our hand back in the cookie jar next time.

Yes, the proper attitude towards Christmas is repentance. For the man who repents, Christmas brings him two gifts, it carries him two steps beyond repentance, for Christmas brings him forgiveness of his sins in the person of Jesus and it brings him the power of the Holy Spirit to help him lead a new life--a life of victory and triumph--a life of new spiritual power where more and more we are enabled to grow into the likeness of Jesus. As John the Baptist put it, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand...I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." That's where Christmas takes us--forgiveness and the power to live a better life--two steps beyond repentance. Remember, it begins with repentance.