

Advent 2 – Year A

“Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near!” That message we hear from John the Baptist this morning is the same message that we will hear coming from the lips of Jesus in the next chapter of this same Gospel of Matthew.

I’ve talked before about the distinction between what we usually think of as the meaning of “repent” and what the word really means. We think of “repenting” as being sorry for and perhaps even making up for our “sins.” Advent was often seen as – like Lent – a season of penance because of that interpretation of what it means to “repent.”

Episcopal priest Marcea Paul says, “Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan point out that the Biblical understanding of the term “repent” is deeply shaped by the Jewish experience of exile. To repent, to return, is to follow the prepared way of the Lord that leads out of our separation and back into reconnection with the God who made us and loves us beyond our understanding.”¹

With that understanding of “repent,” then – when John comes preparing the way of the Lord, he is urging us to follow the path cleared for us, to move from separation back into connection with God and with one another. We are told to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” That is, to live in such a way that our connection, our relationship with God and with one another is evident.

Marcea Paul goes on. “To repent doesn’t mean to simply be sorry. In the New Testament, to repent means to begin seeing differently, to begin thinking differently, both of which lead to acting and living differently. To repent is to change, but not for the sake of change itself. Rather, when we change, we start to live differently, because as we enter a new mindset or as we develop a new way of seeing, we become aware that our actions are out of step with God’s dream for all creation... Beloved, what if we choose to hear John’s call - Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near – not as an ominous threat of impending condemnation, but as an invitation to live into God’s dream?”²

What if, indeed? - God's dream seems to be what we have described in our first reading from Isaiah. When we hear those words – the wolf living with the lamb, the cow and bear grazing together – we most likely can't keep from seeing, in our mind's eye, at least one of the over 100 versions of the *Peaceable Kingdom* that Edward Hicks painted in the early 1800s. But what comes immediately before this idyllic image in Isaiah are these words:

Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts,
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the tallest trees will be cut down,
and the lofty will be brought low.
He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax,
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall (Isaiah 10:33-34).

No *that* is a description that sounds much more in tune with John the Baptist when he says: "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

The point here is this: In order for God's dream to come to pass, in our world and in our lives, there are some things that have to go. In order for there to be a place where the lion can lie down with the lamb – we have to clear some land, take out some trees. For the good fruit to be able to grow, the vines need to be pruned. There are some things that have to go. We came to that same conclusion last week, if you recall.

It can all sound a bit ominous, especially in light of the last line from today's Gospel: Speaking of Jesus, John the Baptizer says, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Too often I've heard that phrase in reference to different *people*. The good people, the wheat, will be gathered into the granary, but the chaff, the bad people, will be burned.

But that's not it at all. This is *good* news, not a threat. Because we are each full of chaff and grain. And what we have here is the assurance that— through the grace of our baptism, through the power of the Holy Spirit – God will help us sift the grain from the chaff. We can be comforted, as Dinah Marie Mullock Craik describes so beautifully, “knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.” It is the chaff that will be done away with, not us, not even those we would *like* to be done away with, perhaps.

God's dream for the world that we hear described in Isaiah comes about only after boughs are lopped off and tall trees cut down. And God's dream involves real change – real repentance. The lamb has had to let go of its fear of the wolf, and the wolf of its drive to eat the lamb. Those who have more than they need have to let go of it, and work to make sure that others *have* what they need. In the dream of God, the *will* of God, all creation is at peace, and all have what they need.

So let us repent. Really repent. Let us not be sorry; rather let us *change*. Let us “follow the prepared way of the Lord that leads out of our separation and back into reconnection with the God who made us and loves us beyond our understanding.”³ ... Let us dare to see things – and one another – differently, so that we can *live* differently – so that we can, indeed, live into God's dream.

May it be so.

- [Isaiah 11:1-10](#)
- [Romans 15:4-13](#)
- [Matthew 3:1-12](#)
- [Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19](#)

¹ Marcea Paul. <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/repent-live-gods-dream-advent-2-december-8-2019>

² Ibid

³ Marcea Paul. <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/repent-live-gods-dream-advent-2-december-8-2019>