

File: Advent 2C 2018 Luke 3:1-6

Dear Servants of Christ, Grace to you and Peace from Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, Amen!

There was a guy who got tired of paying the folks at Jiffy Lube to change his oil. So he went out and bought some tools to do the job figuring they'd pay for themselves after a few oil changes. His wife knew him pretty well and said "Honey, if you're gonna do this yourself at least go to YOUTUBE and see how it's done". He said "Are you kidding any idiot can change their own oil". Right away you know this isn't going to end well.

So he bought a pair of car ramps, a mechanics creeper in order to roll under his car, a container to catch the oil, a special oil filter wrench and an oil filter. To this point he's into it for about \$60 but knows he'll get his money back after a couple oil changes.

So he drives his car up on the ramps, takes out the oil plug and drains the oil, unscrews the oil filter and puts on the new one. Suddenly he realizes he forgot to buy oil. No problem it was only a couple miles to the auto store. So, he backs his car off the ramps and drove to the store and clank clank clank. He blows his engine and the total cost of his oil change was \$3,000.

You might have a few stories like this of your own. Whether it's assembling something and finding a few leftover parts or cooking something you've cooked a thousand times before only this time it doesn't turn out right. Most of the times it's because we don't read the instructions. We figure anybody can do this.

Instructions are a wonderful thing, especially instructions with pictures, after all that's why somebody wrote them or drew them in the first place.

Wouldn't it be great if we had instructions directly from God on how to have the best and most meaningful Christmas ever? I mean I don't know about you but a lot of us don't always read directions but if we knew they came right from God, that would be different. I mean who wouldn't want to hear directly from God on how to get ready for Christmas.

The fact is we have just such a set of instructions from God before us this morning in Luke 3. They remind us that preparing for Christmas and having the most meaningful Christmas ever has nothing to do with presents, though I hope you get what you want, it has nothing to do with everybody getting along, though I hope everyone does because it makes for a lot less drama.

The instructions are the same for us as the ones John the Baptist gave the people as they prepared for Jesus—Are you ready? Here goes. *“John the Baptist*

went into all the country around the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

He said preparing for Christ, preparing for Christmas is about repenting and it's like preparing the way for a king. That's why it goes onto say “As it is written in the book of the words of the Isaiah the prophet: A voice calling in the desert Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in , every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth and all mankind will see god's salvation.”

In ancient times when a king went on a journey they would send out an advance crew to fix the roads so his journey would be smooth. They would straighten the roads, fill in the shallow valleys and make the rough roads smooth.

We still send out advance parties to prepare the way for dignitaries. Only now the advance crews do things like test the fuel for the planes they'll fly in to make sure they haven't been tampered with, they weld shut the manhole covers on their routes through town, they have protocol for checking out the hospitals in the area and there's protocol for surrounding the dignitaries with body guards always protecting their left side more heavily because that's where the heart is. It's pretty extensive the list of stuff they do—preparing the way for the visit of a dignitary.

God's instructions to us to prepare the way for Christ, to have the most meaningful Christmas ever have nothing to do with filling in potholes or welding shut manhole covers or body guards. He says the way to prepare the way for the Lord and to have the best Christmas ever isn't about presents or even everyone getting along as great as that could be, it's about us repenting.

Wow, repentance doesn't sound like very good directions for Christmas after all "tis the season to be jolly", not "Tis the season to feel guilty". It doesn't sound like good directions because the image it brings to mind for so many is some preacher using manipulative scare tactics of fire and brimstone with sermon titles like "turn or burn" or "fly or fry". There are a few folks who will say hey preacher that's just what people need—you gotta scare a little heaven into 'em every now and then---but for most people all it does is get them to tune out rather than tune into God.

So if we are really interested in this being a great Christmas and really being prepared we need to know what repentance is and isn't. First let me say what repentance isn't. Repentance has nothing to do with feeling sorry about yourself or sorry for yourself. Repentance isn't a matter of listing all of the things you wish you hadn't done in your life and feeling badly about them as if you can somehow make them go away or pretend they didn't happen or don't have to live with their consequences. Repentance isn't deciding to be nice, or more generous or more

“spiritual” It’s not about wishing you were a better person or keeping track of your faults, as if God might be persuaded to overlook them if only you could convince Him that you are really, really, really sorry.

Repentance in its simplest form is turning towards God. Repentance is what happens to you and inside of you when you begin to see yourself and god differently. Repentances is like when you wake up in the middle of the night with a pain, or a lump, or a fever and while you lie there wondering if whether it’s something, possibly even life threatening or nothing at all your life begins to look different to you because whether you’ve got ten days or ten thousand days to live you decide to take the time to make every moment count.

Repentance is like what happens inside most people when they have a child. All of the sudden so many things which seemed unimportant to you now take on new meaning, the world looks different when you take on the joyous responsibility of parenting, something changes inside.

Repentance is like when you visit a third world country with abject poverty, starvation and real suffering and when you get back off the plane you want to kiss the ground of the USA. All of the sudden your modest house or apartment looks like a mansion. You go take a shower and adjust the temperature of the water just right and let it run over you and take a sip without fear of getting a disease and you

are overwhelmed and you say “Wow I promise never to take this for granted”-you see things differently.

Repentance is allowing yourself to be grasped by God. And when god grasps you it's not one of those awkward hug hugs where you're all stiff like you're being hugged by your great Aunt Brandy or Uncle Merlot. It's allowing yourself to be hugged and picked up and turned around and set down so that everything looks different, so that we lose our old bearing sin life by which we navigate and are offered new ones instead. Repentance isn't doing a 360 because then you're right back where you started, it's doing a 180 and heading in a new directions.

So as for those fire and brimstone sermons talking about repenting of our ways, you know what---they're right. It is turning from behaviors and attitudes we know are not part of what God wants for us. But first and foremost it's about turning to someone, to God and then it's about turning to new behaviors.

Our part in repenting is having enough good sense to say “Thank you Lord,” instead of “no” or “not yet” or coming up with some lame excuse why we don't repent. And repentance is nothing short of miraculous when we are willing to let go of ourselves and let God be in control.

Sometimes we think that repenting and turning toward God is a one-time thing. But once that moment has passed we often return to our old ways. Once the fever is gone, or once we discover the lump was nothing we forget our promise to never take anything for granted again. Even after we repent the temptations of the world continue to be so strong that it's easy to return to our old ways.. So genuine repentance isn't a one-time thing, it can happen every day.

I know there are a lot of distractions this time of the year. I know that tonight when we put our tree up and I have on my favorite Christmas music that includes but isn't limited to The Brian Setzer Orchestra, BB King Christmas Album, A James Brown Christmas and more I'm not gonna be thinking about repentance. That's just one of the many distractions this time of the year. And oh how we love the distractions because they take our focus off of the real meaning of Christmas.

Folks the message never changes it's about repentance. It's letting God recycle you spiritually, it's about a personal spiritual revival it's about letting God refresh your faith each day, it's about spiritually thriving.

So when John The Baptist gives us directions to "repent" for Christmas, to be open to seeing God in a new way, when he calls us to change and embrace the things of god it's a message of grace. Grace, because it's in that moment of

repentance that we truly, perhaps more than ever before realize the incredible depth of love God must have for us to send his son. It's in that moment of repentance that we understand so deeply how good it is to embrace the things of God.

Sooo—the directions for having the best Christmas ever are this Repent and turn towards The Lord.