

Repent, for the kingdom of our current culture needs to think about repentance in a completely different way.

To repent literally means to change the direction of one's mind, and as a result to change the direction and the defining patterns of one's life.

We need to change our mindset about repentance itself, to repent of our popular notions of repentance.

Too often we warp repentance into a one person drama, a monologue play about how I found Jesus in prison and let him into my heart while evicting its former tenants, alcohol or violence or despair or what have you.

It's just as self-centered as the former life, with Jesus simply becoming the new addiction for the same self-absorbed individual.

It becomes a symptom rather than a challenge of the individualism that stifles our society.

But John's clarion call is for the nation of Israel, for the people as a whole community and not just a crowd of individuals.

John's diet and wardrobe recall the plagues of Egypt and the prophets of empire and exile, the haunting memories and decisive, defining moments of struggle in Israel's history.

His most stinging words are aimed at the leadership of the people, naming them the children of snakes, implicating them by association with Greek and Hebrew mythology as destroyers of motherhood and paradise and all things holy and good.

John's pointed preaching is designed to turn around a society, a nation, a culture, not just a life here or a wayward heart there.

It is far bigger and bolder than our popular notion, and it cuts against our own assumptions and tendencies to think only within the toxic confines of individualism and personal family.

John is beckoning the people as a whole to repent of what none of them can turn or change alone. Repent of Roman imperial propaganda and of Jewish spiritual entitlement.

Repent of a patriotism expressed as consumerism and xenophobia, and of a spirituality as self-centered and shallow as the rest of a market-driven, image-obsessed society.

Our Wednesday evening gatherings here at Resurrection this season are an initial foray into such a radical and refreshing repentance: we are exploring the "Advent Conspiracy" of worshiping fully instead of with divided attention when it's compelling or convenient, of spending less while giving more, of loving all instead of just the lovable, the familiar, the popular, the pretty, or the ones with whom we share some commonality or closeness.

It is far more than we can muster alone, it is designed to be more than any of us can hoard alone, so we must come together to the prophet, to the wilderness, to the bleak and frightening landscape of fundamental change.

We won't get it right on the first try.

We won't master it this year, or maybe ever.

The magical one-time turnaround is another notion about repentance of which we need to repent.

It is naive and perilously perfectionistic to assume that repentance is a one-and-done.

That is why when John shouts it in Greek, he uses the present tense, which denotes continual, ongoing action: *keep on repenting*.

Continue to repent, because of course you will continue to need to.

Social forces are relentless, so repentance must be as well, a lifestyle choice rather than a life event, an ongoing commitment rather than a once upon a time memory.
Among other things, this means that there is no room for resting on our laurels.
Our own community here at Resurrection has plenty of reasons to be proud.
I regularly share the history of this congregation at new member gatherings with a deep sense of appreciation and even pride: how we have had the repenters' courage to worship in English and welcome persons of every sexual orientation and establish top-shelf children's programs and launch SummerFest and install solar panels and witness to the world and wider church with strong support and prophetic challenge and on and on I go.
But we dare not content ourselves with what we have done in the past.
God is able from the dusty rubble of our foreclosed building to raise up a faithful community.
Whatever I have accomplished as your pastor, if anything, is meaningless; I too need to keep repenting, keep growing, keep changing, keep bearing fruit and blessing this community and neighborhood with supportive witness, truthful speech and rigorous love or God will hack me down and throw me into the fire for the good of everyone.
But this isn't about me, or about any of my viper spawn colleagues, and I need to repent whenever I fall into the trap of thinking that it is.
This isn't about you, either, you the pew-sitter already too overwhelmed by an unmanageably complicated life in an unrelenting, unforgiving society with no energy left for extra church involvement much less some form of radical repentance; you're just trying to survive Christmas and Year-end at the job you can't afford to lose.
This is bigger than either of us, bigger than all of us, and far more than we can handle.
And that leads us to the biggest, baddest bogus notion of repentance from which we need to keep turning away.
We need to repent of the illusion that we are able to repent.
We must repent of the presumption that we can make everything right on our own.
Whether as individuals or as a community, no matter how much power we really do have, we do not have what it takes to complete the challenge of making things right.
We cannot judge with righteousness or decide with equity beyond what our eyes can see and our ears can hear.
We cannot achieve a peace in which the wolf and the lamb, the calf and the lion and the fatling, the Muslim and the Christian and the Jew, the west and the east, the capitalist and the terrorist lie down together.
We cannot turn the world around even if we can manage to tilt our heavyset hearts a little; real, full repentance is beyond our tiny grasp.
We must repent of the destructive operational lie that we can do it all.
Richard Jensen explains:

*Unfortunately, repentance is often understood as an "I can" experience.
"I am sorry for my sins. I can do better. I can please you, God."
So often we interpret repentance as our way of turning to God.
That cannot be.
Christianity is not about an individual turning to God.
Christianity is about God turning to us.
Repentance is an "I can't" experience.*

*To repent is to volunteer for death.
Repentance asks that the "death of self" which God began to work in us in baptism continue to this day.*

The repentant person comes before God saying, "I can't do it myself, God.

Kill me and give me new life."

(Richard Jensen, Touched by the Spirit, quoted by Brian Stoffregen in his exegetical notes for crossmarks.com)

The good news of Advent and John the Baptist is that the *ax is lying at the root of the trees.*

Death is near, the haunting and holy death that leads to life, the bloody baptismal blade that reduces the tree into a stump from which a shoot of hope can come forth.

The kingdom of heaven has come near, and no shiny distractions or hollow consumerism or empty political promises will be able to substitute for it or satisfy our souls.

The kingdom of heaven has come near, in weird preaching and broken people, in broken bread shared by an imperfect community, in fragments instead of flash, and ultimately in a Messiah who is neither a hero or a king but a bastard baby and a convicted criminal, love that is salty and sweaty and stubborn and raw, painfully human and real.

Stop running away from it and turn to welcome it.

Dare to repent, and prepare the way of a Lord no one can rightly predict or properly expect.