

It's pretty certain that the face on the cover of our bulletin is not that of Santa Claus. Aside from his hair not being white, it's obvious that he is not saying, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" He is not jolly, not even a little bit. He is stern. He appears to be dead serious about what he is saying. And since the face belongs to John, we know that from his mouth there comes the call to repent.

But of course. It's Advent. And even though the world around us is already in the Christmas season and Christmas spirit, we in the church have to wait two more weeks. Yes, I know, it does look like Christmas in here. The tree is up along with other decorations. But ignore these for the moment if you can. It's not Christmas yet. It's Advent. The call to repent is before us. John's face is plastered on our bulletin cover, and his cry to prepare the way of the Lord is in our ears.

Now I kind of doubt that any of us really enjoy John all that much. He's not the Baby Jesus. He's not ribbons and bows, eggnog and presents beneath the tree. He's almost the exact opposite of these. He wears scratchy camel hair for clothing. He eats grasshoppers, and not on a dare. It's his main source of nutrition. I'm sure his breath could curl our hair. But even worse is what comes from his mouth in the way of words. Who of us likes to repent? That means to stop what we are doing, turn completely around, and do the opposite. But we like what we're doing. Otherwise, we wouldn't do it, right?

We're like water running down a mountain side. We go one direction, having no desire to change course. But even if we wanted to, we couldn't do it. Water running down a mountain does not suddenly decide to go up the mountain, nor can it. The force on it is too strong for it to reverse itself.

That's us. We hear John crying, "Repent! Turn around. Change the direction you are going." But we can't. It's not gravity that is too strong for us; it's the power of sin. It keeps us from doing what is right before God. It prevents us from changing our course in life.

So, what are we to do? Ignore Advent and the call to repent? Just skip ahead to Christmas with the rest of the world? But the world is going to perish. The world has no use for Advent, no desire to repent, nor will it. And if we do not want to perish forever with those who are of the world, we must repent. And not just today, but every day.

There are two things this morning that we need to know about repentance. The first of these is that repentance is the work of God in us. The second is that the call to repent is a gracious call, a call that is filled with hope.

*"John appeared," says our text, "baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all...were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."*

They are coming from Jerusalem and Judea. From the heights. The river Jordan is down low in the wilderness. The people flow downhill like water from Jerusalem to the Jordan. Yet God is causing the people to flow to John, to where he is baptizing.

And look at the sequence of events in our text. They are baptized by John, and being baptized, they confess their sins; they repent. They do not first confess their sins and then go to John for baptism. Baptism first, then repentance.

And it's because the power of God at work in baptism enables them to repent, confessing their sins. And then what? They change course. They go up the mountain heights back to their homes in Jerusalem and Judea. Rather than going downhill, they now go uphill. And this is also how it works for us.

The force of sin that takes us down, down the mountain, yes down to the depths of darkness away from God, is a very powerful force. But there is a force far more powerful than sin. It's the power of God's grace. And this powerful force He places into Holy Baptism. Read the New Testament. It's quite clear on this.

You are not going to repent, nor am I, for sin is more powerful than we are, unless through our baptism into Christ, where God is powerfully at work, He works repentance in us. We are simply unable, like water running downhill, to change our sinful course in life. But because Jesus' blood ran down the mountain called Calvary, from His cross to us, to where we are under the power of our sin, through His gracious and powerful cleansing blood, into which we are baptized, we are able to change our course and go up the mountain, confessing our sins and repenting, turning away from them.

To ignore baptism, to never recall that we are baptized into Christ, into His death and resurrection, is to be like a lamp that is not plugged into an electrical outlet. The power is there for it, but it does not make use of it. To repent, therefore, is simply to return to our baptism. And this call to repent is a gracious call. It's a call of hope. And here's why. God would not call you to repent unless good things were promised to the one who does repent. If there was no forgiveness for those who repent, why should we repent? If life and salvation were not promised to the one who repents, we may as well continue our downhill course and have as much fun with sin while we can before we die and perish with the world.

But there is hope for all who repent. God has promised that He will not leave us to our sin, but that He gladly and freely forgives our sin for the sake of Jesus. Do not despair, therefore, that your sins are great, and that they have carried you downhill. You will not perish in your sins. God forgives you. Yes, you! Each and every one of you. Jesus carried your sins to His cross. They took Him into the depths of hell for you, in your place. And He now, your risen and victorious Lord, carries you up the mountain. He seats you in the heavenly places.

And this all begins with repentance. And thus, repentance is God's gracious work in us. And so, John with camel hair, locust breath, and all, is necessary, isn't he? Advent is necessary, isn't it? These are gifts of God to prepare the way for Jesus to come to us.

And come He does. He comes to forgive you, to give you life and salvation. Not sometime in the future. Now! Today! These gifts are yours right now for they are in your baptism. Amen.