

Luke 3:1-14

Years ago, going to the movies sometimes meant sitting through two hours of glitches because of troubles with the projector. Right in the middle of an action-packed scene, movie-goers would suddenly give a collective groan because the film had come off its track. Everything would come to a halt. Sometimes viewers would see a burning hole up on the screen, and they would get up to refill their popcorn, knowing it would take a few minutes to fix the projector which had burnt the film. And then there were times when the man up in the projector room would have to rewind the film, so that the viewers would see the movie going backwards in time.

This, in a way, describes that is going on in the season of Advent--the four Sundays before Christmas. We're rewinding the film. Last Sunday, the First Sunday in Advent, Jesus was on the road into Jerusalem on a donkey. John the Baptist had been dead for some time. Today we meet John in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, and John is just beginning his ministry of preaching and baptizing at the Jordan River. In two weeks we will again meet John, but on that day--the Fourth Sunday in Advent--he will be still in his mother's womb.

We're going backwards. And it's not just this year; every Advent season we do the same thing. Always on the First Sunday in Advent, John is long dead. On the Second Sunday he is beginning his ministry. And on the Fourth Sunday he isn't even born yet. Sitting in church during Advent is like sitting in an old-time movie theater. Because of problems with the projector, the film is not moving forward; it's in rewind.

But the man up in the projector room knew what he was doing. He rewound the film to a point where he could safely play it forward. The rewinding process was done in the old days because it was the only way the movie could be shown without the film going off its tracks again.

And so for us. In Advent we are in rewind, until we get to the point where we can safely move forward again. And that point is Christmas. On the Fourth Sunday in Advent, John and Jesus are in the wombs of their mothers. But on Christmas the film moves forward as Jesus is born from His mother's womb. Christmas is the place in the film where we stop going backwards and start to move forward again. And we keep moving forward. After Jesus is born on Christmas, we see Him when He is eight-days old in the temple. We see Him when the Magi come to visit. We see Him when He is twelve-years old in the temple. And then Epiphany comes and Jesus begins His ministry at around thirty years of age. Once Christmas comes, the film moves forward. No problems. No glitches. Jesus does what He was born to do.

But we are not there yet. We're in Advent. We're in rewind. There is a problem with the projector...or, better said, there's a problem with us. We must repent. We cannot safely move forward with our lives until we first go backwards and repent. That's what Advent is about--preparing for Christ by repenting. This was John's cry out in the desert: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight*. Fill up the valleys. Make low the mountains and hills. Make the crooked places straight and the rough places level.

Do you see the film of your life in the projector? I see mine. It's all twisted and crooked. It's rough on the edges. In one place it's too high; in another, too low. This is why we need Advent. God's preacher stops us in our tracks and says: Wait a minute! Back up. Your life is a twisted mess. Your eyes have been full of lust. Your heart has been full of greed. Your mind is set on things below, not on things above. You're setting aside the Word and Commandment of God and living by your own rules. If you

keep moving forward like this, the film which is all turned around and twisted in the projector, will burn up. Or, as John puts it, *You will be thrown into the fire of hell*. So back up. Repent. Now is the time before things get even worse, and your heart becomes even more stubborn.

But how do we back up? And to what point in our life do we back up? We back up to Christmas--to where Christ was born in you--in your baptism. This is an Advent thing, but also a daily exercise, as Luther says...we must daily back up and return to our baptism. That's what John was doing out by the Jordan. He was baptizing, because your baptism into Christ is the only place in the film where it is safe to move forward with your life. In baptism the Old Adam in you is drowned and dies with all sins and evil lusts. In baptism your sins are forgiven. The New Man--Christ Himself--comes to live in you. He loves God and the gifts of God. He lives in you so that you live in the Faith and bear the fruits of faith in your life. In baptism the crooked places in your life are made straight. The rough places are made level. The mountains are made low and the valleys are raised up. Now in Advent, and every day, we back up and return to our baptism.

You cannot watch a movie when the film is all gnarled up in the projector. Everyone in the theater will see it burn. And yes, so many who refuse to repent are heading for such destruction by fire. But God has something better prepared for you. And so listen to His call when the preacher cries, "Repent!" Go back to your baptism and consider yourself dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Do not let sin control you. Jesus is your Master, not the passions of your flesh.

See Him, your loving Savior, as His hands and feet are all gnarled up and pierced with nails on the cross. See His body twisted and turned in agony as He dies for you. Watch as Jesus burns in the agony of hell in your place. It's not that His film was all twisted up in the projector. It's our lives, not His, that are turned and twisted by sin. But He came and stepped in for you. His life was shredded because He suffered the consequences--He paid the penalty for what our sin did, and what we deserve.

And now friend, what this means for you is that you have a God who forgives you. Your life, like mine, is a sinful mess. But God looks at what Jesus did, and He forgives you. Your sin, like mine, has twisted you and turned you away from God. But God comes to forgive you. He is always present for you in the cleansing waters of your baptism. He does not rip the film out of the projector and throw it into the fire. He forgives you. For Jesus' sake, He forgives you.

If you are in this daily habit--wonderful. But if not, begin today to return to your baptism. Draw the sign of the cross upon your heart as it was done when you were baptized into Christ, and remind yourself, "I am baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Every day go back to this point where Christ was born in you. And every day you can, then, safely move forward with Jesus. Amen.