**The Two Rs of Advent**

December 4, 2016

2nd Sunday of Advent

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Readin', Writin', and `Rithmatic, may be the three R's of basic education but the two "R" words which characterize today’s Bible readings are the words Repent and Rejoice. I know that I prefer Rejoice.

Robert McAfee Brown, a tongue-in-cheek theologian who penned the little book, *The Sacred Writings of St. Heriticus*, gives us a glossary of recommended terms for pastors. He recommends using the word *sin* often in preaching. He tells us that it adds color to the sermon because it stimulates hearers to conjure up of vivid images about the temptations of sin - images like black lingerie and neon lights, the kind of things the more commonly humble Christian avoids.

Brown tells pastors to use phrases such as "my Bible says," often and to hold up a limped back copy of the Biblical text for emphasis. But, he adds, of all the words to be avoided is the word “Repent.” No one is serious about repenting. It just makes folk feel awful to think that repentance is something they ought to do. I rather agree. I much prefer the sound and suggestion of Rejoice to Repent! Advent would be a much more satisfying season if we focused on Rejoice and abandoned Repent.

You see, we could rejoice in the music and rejoice in our wants. Younger children can think about all the amusing things they're going to get. Older children will ruminate on all the joyous times they've had. Christmas and Advent is a time for memories: looking and longing - with signs of satisfaction and looking forward to some hope for precious moments to be made. Over this I can rejoice but to Repent?

When I play back the tapes of my childhood, see the video on the retina of my mind of days when we looked for just the right gift for each person, I have a warm satisfying feeling. There were carols around the piano, fires in the fireplace, and secrets whispered and hidden in closets. And I remember that special book which my family - along with every other family - kept so prominently displayed in preparation for the big day. Every family had one. And every family cherished it, adored it, and searched its pages to fill the holiday with meaning. No, I'm not talking about the bible. I'm remembering the Sears Christmas Catalog!

Christians throughout the world, on this 2nd Sunday of Advent will encounter John the Baptist. Here we are, getting ready for the unrestrained joy of angels, tinsel, carols, and cheery glow of Christmas and in comes this character - dusty, camel hair coat, not cashmere, reeking of locust and honey. He smells of poverty and desert discipline. He refuses to live up in the big city, at Jerusalem with the powerful and educated, preferring instead the desert dust, a more fitting climate for John's brand of preaching.

The church in its wisdom has always demanded that if you really want to see what's in Bethlehem's manger, you must first confront this crazy prophet out in the wilderness, whose sermons are as bitter and wild as the terrain.

John's gaunt figure at Yuletide is striking contrast to the jolly, fat elf in a red velvet suit, bagful of gifts for those who have too much already. How many Christmas cards have you received depicting John the Baptist? Greetings from our house to yours. Our thoughts of you at this time of the year are best expressed in the words of John the Baptist, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Merry Christmas, the Boak Family.

John is not a popular figure to work up in ceramics. You won't find him as a character in a crèche or Hallmark card or a sugar cookie. And yet, all the gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have him there, right in the beginning of their books, as if to say you cannot meet Jesus until you have met John, as if to say that you cannot know why there is Emmanuel, God with us, until John tells you why we so desperately need God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

John intrudes into our exuberant celebrations of ourselves at this time of year. It is during Advent that we begin to rejoice in our goodness. What need have good people like us for the harsh medicine John is trying to pour down our throats? The tough castor oil of repentance? What need have basically good people like us for God to come to Bethlehem to save us, since we are, if we can be appealed to positively, quite capable of saving ourselves.

Perhaps we could pull it off, this seasonal attempt at communal and individual self-delusion were it not for John, who comes ranting down the aisle at our Christmas pageant swinging invective and epithet, demanding to cleanse us of our delusions with a cold dip in icy

Jordan.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," says John. "Good," we say, "At last God has come to give us what we deserve, set us up, treat us right, soothe our pain, take our side. After all, isn't that the purpose of religion, to make us feel better about ourselves?"

"Therefore, repent," says John. Do what? Repent, turn around, let go change our attitude, admit our sin and disobedience?" To the academic-political-religious establishment, John sneered, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming fire? Bear fruit of repentance!"

I reassure myself, "He's attacking street hoodlums, criminals, not you and me." Then John turns to me, screaming, "And don't you say, `We have Abraham as our father or my family have always been members of this church.’"

John raves, "You are not indispensable to the Lord. God can raise up a people out of the stones in this river if God wants." Even the chosen, the enlightened, the insiders must repent, get turned around, washed up to be ready.

"You Snakes!" as another translation puts it. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Although this will no doubt get some attention, it hardly seems like the way to begin sermon. Few preachers would be very popular if they began each week's message by castigating the congregation and calling them names. Now we don't know that John the Baptist began each sermon this way, but on at least one occasion he did.

John the Baptist demeaned their history. That's not the way to be acclaimed, my friend. He promised doom and destruction. That's not the way to be invited to return for another engagement. But, John's purpose had a limited scope. He did not intend to be anyone's pastor. He saw his role only as one sent to prepare the way. We suspect that he had other messages, too but our Matthew text for today reveals his explicit purpose, to ready his hearers for the arrival of the Messiah.

Looking at the aggregate of synoptic reports of John’s sermon, we might say that on this day, the denouncing tone of John's message stirred from the crowd the question, "What then shall we do?" And, for each of the group of "sinners" who asked, he provided an act of repentant living.

The directness of his message, his appearance, his expectation of a new life opened the door to his speaking about the Christ, and allowed John to point to Jesus. Then, Luke concluded and summarizes the doom, the denouncement, the call for repentance with the phrase, "So with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people. Well, apparently, he exemplifies what William K. McElvaney, professor at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology claims is one of the hearts of the gospel when he wrote, "good news is bad news is good news."[[2]](#footnote-2)

Seldom would you and I categorize the direct preaching of John as "good news." If such a word was addressed to us, wouldn't it be called "bad news?"

When we read this morning's Old Testament lesson, we might have thought, how wonderful for Isaiah to have such encouraging and positive words,

*7The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. 9They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

That is the kind of good news we long to hear. But, Isaiah, one of the major prophets knew about captivity for Israel and talked about destruction where little would be left except a stump. He gave warnings of approaching judgment - the coming time of wrath upon a disobedient Israel. God's tough but tender love can be seen in so many of the prophets, but there was also a call to behavioral change.

This tender love with its tough exterior, is the message of the prophet. It was the style of Isaiah and the style of John, who was very much a prophet. I think John was an unusual attraction for several reasons.

First of all, there had been no prophecy in Israel for about four hundred years, not since the prophet Micah. I am sure throughout this time there was no shortage of would-be prophets, but nobody listened.[[3]](#footnote-3) As far as the populace was concerned, God had been silent for four hundred years in speaking to His people through an authentic prophet. But, it was believed that prophecy would rise again when the Messiah was about to come. So, all Israel was waiting for one who might be that authentic prophet. John was such a prophet, and throngs came out to hear this one who might prove to be the true announcer of the Messiah.

It is difficult for us to balance the tough and tender aspects of love. No doubt some people reacted so quickly to the initial announcement that Isaiah or John gave, that they never got to hear the resulting good news.

I read about an eleven-year old golfer - a tall, blond kid, big for his age. He was developing so quickly that he could compete with fifteen-year-olds and beat most of them. This young fellow could hit the ball a mile, they said. He had a superb swing and the style and poise of an adult. One day he made a bad shot and angrily threw his club as far as he could. His father, who was playing with him, walked over, and picked up the club. He brought it back and handed it to the boy saying, "Here is your club. The next time you do that will be the last time you ever set foot on this golf course!"

Jack Nicklaus took the lesson to heart. Those who are interested in golf are probably glad that Jack's father didn't just say, "Naughty, naughty, you mustn't do that!" We're also glad he didn't break a club over Jack's head and kick him off the course right then! There was a toughness about that father's love, but there was a tenderness also, because he knew his boy was only eleven.[[4]](#footnote-4)

John's essential message was simply that we be what we ought to be. Let's confess our sins and begin to act like we ought. He addressed himself in specifics to the ethics of the time: soldiers, don't intimidate and coerce and be content with your wages; tax collectors, collect no more than what you are supposed to obtain. He spoke of sharing with those in need, if you have several coats, share with the one who has none, if you've got plenty of food, give to those who are hungry. This was not a new ethic. The rabbis had been saying all these things. But John was preaching that those ethics were to be a way of life.

John's instruction raised a touchy issue of our time. There is sometimes a gulf in the church between the roots and the fruits people. Some talk about roots - the Bible, commitment, Jesus, prayer. They have scant social concern and little involvement with the pain of the world around them.

In the other camp are those who say that belief and personal piety are incidental to a commitment to the cause of the disadvantaged and social justice. This is the fruits camp. Now if all you have is roots with nothing visibly flowering, you have missed the point. But the other emphasis is cut-flower Christianity, and when the heat is on, those cut flowers are going to wilt. John wants us to bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." He even goes further to say,

*10Even 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.*

I thought to myself – maybe this gospel reading would have more punch if I had walked down the aisle during the prelude, swinging an axe and just leaned it against the side of the pulpit. That certainly would have caught someone’s attention and would probably have prompted a comment or two around the donut holes during our coffee and fellowship time after worship.

So, we are to change, and what will this change get us? That is usually the way we want to view it, what's in it for me? Well, try on peace. It is an approach all throughout scripture, especially the New Testament.

*And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ.*

Dave Garroway, for many years host of the TODAY show on NBC, attainted wealth, fame, and respect. Someone once asked him about his understanding of Christmas. Here's how he replied:

"I've noticed that when people are asked what they want for Christmas, 9 times out of 10 answer with something which can be bought. That used to be amusing to me, but it's not amusing any longer. I happen to be one of those people who can afford anything he wants, but I find what I really want, I can't buy at all. I want peace of mind; peace of soul, the kind of peace you have when you don't really want anything.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In 1987 the *Philadelphia Enquirer* contained an article about a man of some wealth who overhead a lady remarking outside of Wannamaker’s Department Store, "Oh, if I only had fifty dollars I would be perfectly content."

He thought about that for a few moments. If the lady only had fifty dollars she would be content. He thought to himself, "Well, I can help her out." so, he walked up to her and handed her a fifty-dollar bill with his best wishes. She was very overt in her show of gratitude. She really appreciated his gift. As she walked away he heard her mumble under her breath, "Why on earth didn't I say one hundred dollars?"

Contrast this with the experience with that of Moss Hart, the great writer recalling a childhood Christmas.

His family was quite poor, but his father took him shopping along the busy streets of New York City. They were looking to buy a Christmas present for young Moss. The merchandise was displayed on push carts lined up beside the street. The young boy's eyes were fixed on such extravagances as chemistry sets, printing presses, and other wonders of the modern world. Each time they found something that young Moss liked, his father would ask the merchant the price. Then he would shake his head sadly and move on.

They came to the end of the push carts, but still had made no purchase. Here is what Moss Hart writes about that event,

"I heard my father jingle some coins in his pocket. In a flash, I knew it all. He had gotten together about 75 cents to buy me a Christmas present. He hadn't dared say so in case there was nothing to be had for that small sum."

"As I looked up at him, I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I had ever been in my life. I wanted to throw my arms around him and say, `It doesn't matter, I understand. This is better than a printing press. I love you.' But instead we stood shivering beside each other for a moment and turned away from the last two push carts and started silently back home. I didn't even take his hand on the way home nor did he take mine. We were not on that basis; nor did I ever tell him how close I felt to him that night. I never told him that for a little while the concrete wall between father and son had crumbled away and I knew that we were two lonely people struggling to reach out to each other."[[6]](#footnote-6)

My fellow vipers. It is time for us to respond to the one who gave us the best that he had, his only son. His love is both tough, telling us to repent and change, while at the same time tender, holding out the satisfaction of peace which comes in no other way. In that we can rejoice!

1. William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource, Vol. 22, No. 4*, 1994 (South St. Paul: Logos Publishing, 1994), pp. 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Preaching*, Vol. IV, No. 3, November-December 1988, ed. by Michael Duduit, (Jacksonville, Florida: Preaching Resources, Inc.), 1988, p. 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bruce Larson, *Luke: The Communicator's Commentary, Vol. 3* (Waco, Texas: Word Books), 1983, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. D. Stuart Briscoe, *Taking God Seriously: Major Lessons from the Minor Prophets*, (Waco, Texas: Word Books), 1986, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sadly, Dave Garroway died at the age of 69 from a self-inflicted gun-shot wound. The peace of mind that he so desperately wanted was difficult. [http://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/22/obituaries/dave-garroway-69-found-dead-first-host-of-today-on-nbc-tv.html.](http://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/22/obituaries/dave-garroway-69-found-dead-first-host-of-today-on-nbc-tv.html.%20%20) Retrieved, November 28, 2016 by bgboak - Mr. Garroway's son, Michael said that his father ''had been suffering from post-operative complications following open heart surgery and we were extremely surprised at the turn of events. We believe he unfortunately succumbed to the traumatic effects of his illness.'' [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. Robert Raines, *Creative Brooding*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1977), pp. 345-346. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)