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**A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent December 6 2009
Sermon Preached at Christ Church +Washington Parish
by the Rev. Martha Wallace ©**

Some thirty years ago, I was working at a small private library at the edge of the Boston Common. It was right around the corner from the Paulist Center, one of the first places I remember seeing one of those big signs – the kind that each week sports some catchy message meant to pique the curiosity of non-churchgoers so they will come into the church to check it out. Anyway, as I came across the Common one morning on my way to work, that sign caught my eye. In great big bold black letters, it read “REPENT and BE SAVED.” Below in much smaller letters it said: “If you have already repented, please disregard this notice.”

Well, whether we have already repented or not, it is the second Sunday of Advent and on the Second Sunday of Advent, the readings of the day always contain a story about John the Baptist. Where there is a story about John the Baptist, there is bound to be a call to repentance.

This morning we are invited to hear that call to repentance again and consider what it might mean for us, who are, most of us, already Christians. Having repented once, and accepted Christ as Savior, we may believe we have no further need to repent. Of the many misconceptions about repentance the idea that Christians have no further need for repentance is perhaps one of the most dangerous. Such a misconception can lead us to gradually drift away from God without even realizing there is a growing gap; plunging us deep into the world of illusion, in which we are increasingly estranged from God yet don’t completely understand the emptiness we feel. A little repentance will go a long way in remedying such estrangement.

But even we Christians who realize that sin is ever before us and that constant re-focusing of our attention back to God is a necessary daily event can fall into a misconception about repentance. We can begin to be so focused on the sin that we come to think of ourselves as unforgivable. For us, our idea of repentance may consist in us beating ourselves up, in the hope that if we prove ourselves to be sorry enough, maybe God will forgive us, even though we don’t deserve it. Actually, there are two misconceptions in there: first, our thinking that we might under any circumstances deserve to be forgiven – which is just not true; no human being earns forgiveness which is always a gift of God, freely offered.

The second, perhaps more insidious misconception is thinking that there is a cause and effect

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relationship between our sorry-ness and God's forgiveness. We become convinced that is what happens that we repent, and then God forgives us. But that's really not how it works. In fact, it is just the opposite. What comes first is that God loves us and forgives us. Then, after we realize that we have been forgiven by God, we turn back to God in gratitude and we change our lives to be focused on God instead of focused on ourselves. The repenting is not the part where we are sorry and beg for forgiveness, the repenting is the part where we turn back to God. God's forgiveness pre-exists our repentance. Repentance is our response to this unimaginable, overflowing love and forgiveness. The Hebrew word 'teshuvah' as we translate it 'repentance' means to turn around - returning to God. The idea is that when we have strayed away from God, we need to turn around, and head back in God's direction. So a call to repent isn't meant to make us feel bad or guilty or to beat ourselves up, but to serve as a reminder that it is easy to lose our way without meaning to. A call to repentance is God yelling out "Hey, Martha, I'm over here!"

Have you ever awakened one day to realize that you haven't seen God for weeks (or months or years). We sometimes drift off course. We are going along leading our lives, and one thing leads to another and before we know it, we are lost. So we say, "Hey God, how about a little help finding the right road?" God is always there to point the way. We repent, we turn around and head back in God's direction, and before we know it we are back home with God again.

A call to repentance is a very good thing, because the whole idea of being called to repent includes within it two things: first, that God already forgives us and second, that is always possible to repent. With God's help, we can change. No matter how badly we've messed up our lives, or how badly we've allowed someone else to mess up our lives, we don't have to be stuck in that mess forever. With God's help, we can change. What John the Baptist reminds us with his call to a baptism of repentance is that we don't come here to Church because we're already clean. No, we come because we're washable. With God's help we can turn away from all the things that mess up our lives up or make us dirty, so we can start to clean up our lives and become more like the people Jesus wants us to be. So that is what is really at the heart of repentance: that because God has already forgiven us, we can change.

God will always be there, to point the way home when we find we have wandered off, because, God loves us and God always will. That is a message we need to hear over and over again, because sometimes it is hard for us to believe that we are loved. But we are.

Any of you who have children know what I am talking about. You love your children and you want the best for them. You even have some ideas about what that might look like, but being a good parent you let them make their own choices. You nurture them. You give them whatever you think they need – and most of what they want, too, even though they don't seem to be aware of how hard you work to make these things available for them, and even though they rarely express gratitude. You try to teach them your values and you hope that those values will serve as guiding forces for their lives. But sometimes, they don't. They follow some path we are sure will lead to no good, yet they continue to follow it no matter how fervently or how frequently we try to point out the error of their ways. It is clear to us if not to them that they don't always act in their own best

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interests, and it distresses us no end.

I imagine God thinks of us that way. We are after all God's children. God tries to make sure we share God's values. God gives us so many things we don't appreciate. I would lay odds that God is sure that our lives would be so much more satisfying if only we lived them the way God suggests we should, but we go off in some other direction. It must drive God crazy. But actually, it doesn't seem to. Just like you are there for your children when they mess up, just as you welcome them home and help them sort things out, so God waits with open arms to welcome us back whenever we stray.

Even if we human parents have a breaking point beyond which we cannot go, God seemingly has no breaking point where we are concerned. No matter what we do or how long we stay away, God leaves the porch light on, in case we decide to come home. The bottom line is, God loves us, and God has already forgiven us, no matter what we have done. There never will be a time when God won't welcome us home, hoping that once we rediscover how much God loves us and forgives us, we will want to change our lives to be more like the kind of lives God wants us to live - lives that are focused on God and others, rather than on ourselves.

This is repentance, this is turning our lives around. It implies not only that we are sorry but that we will make the effort to turn our lives back to God, because claiming God's love and forgiveness while continuing to do what we have always done is not repentance; it is manipulation.

So, John the Baptist comes particularly at this time of the year, to remind us to repent, to re-focus on God, because too often as Christmas approaches we are focused on everything but God. We are so distracted by shopping and baking and decorating and wrapping gifts and planning parties and going to parties that the last thing we are thinking about is God.

Is it just coincidence that God sends John the Baptist to us every year on the very same weekend as St Nick's dinner and sale, when our parish reaches the pinnacle of our holiday busyness? I wonder. But, every year, on the Sunday after the dinner, here comes John the Baptist to remind us who is at the center of the season. John barges into the room and shoves the unwrapped presents off the table. He turns off the oven and unplugs the Christmas lights and shakes his fist in our faces! "Pay attention" he cries. "You have lost your way. Jesus is almost here. God is coming to be with us. Forget the presents and the cards and the wrapping for a minute and focus on that. Forget cleaning the house – clean up your lives instead. Turn around, turn back to God.

So, it is every year on the second Sunday of Advent, we are invited to make room for the one who created us, who loves us beyond imagining and has big plans for us. Repent. Turn back to God and make room in your heart and in your life for your maker, your redeemer, your savior, your parent, your God. May it be so.

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