

untie.” It’s interesting that Jesus once called John the Baptist the greatest person who ever lived (Luke 7:28), and yet John didn’t consider himself worthy enough to untie Jesus’ shoes. That’s the humility of repentance. Repentance is letting go of sin—and letting go of me—and trusting Jesus to hold on to me. Each day is a chance to humbly go to Jesus, let go of my sin, and trust in his forgiveness.

You could say that in a way repentance is as necessary to our hearts as breathing is to our bodies. Without even thinking about it, you breathe out and in and out and in all day long. What if you decided you weren’t going to breathe out? What if you decided to only breathe in? How would that work out? It wouldn’t! You don’t just need new air. You need to get rid of the old—over and over again! It’s the same with our faith. Breathing in Christ without breathing out our sinfulness doesn’t work. It puffs up. It leads to “holier than thou” Christians who aren’t Christians at all. There’s no such thing as an arrogant Christian. A Christian repents and believes and repents and believes...

There’s a phrase that people often like to say: “God loves you just the way you are...” Is that true? Of course it is! This is God’s grace! “*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). No matter who you are or what you’ve done, God loves you! No doubt about it. But that phrase, “God loves you just the way you are” doesn’t tell the whole story. It can be misused to imply that God loves everything about you—even your sins. Max Lucado—a popular Christian author—says it in a different way: “God loves you just the way you are, but he doesn’t leave you the way you are...” God loves you with all your sins and your doubts, but God doesn’t leave you in all your sins and your doubts. He sent Jesus to take them all away. So every day, in repentance, you go to Jesus as you are, and every day he makes you something new: forgiven and loved. “God loves you just the way you are, but he doesn’t leave you the way you are...”

So what does it mean to be a Christian? “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Repent and trust in Christ. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. This is the daily life of a Christian. Because there is “One greater than me in whom I trust.” Who each day takes me as I am and changes me into what I was not. Who each day takes my sins and gives me his own righteousness. Whose birth we get to celebrate and whose return we eagerly await. So put the lights up. Bake the cookies. And as you do that, prepare your heart. Every day. Preparing for Jesus means, “Repent!”

Mark 1:1-8
Pastor Nathan Nass

Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2016

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.² It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”—³ “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ”⁴ And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.⁷ And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Preparing for Jesus: Repent!

About a month ago—on Halloween—we celebrated Reformation Day. That’s the day we remember what God used Martin Luther to do. If you were here, I told you how Martin Luther pounded 95 Theses on a church door—95 statements about the Bible that he wanted to debate. As Lutherans, we’re thankful for Martin Luther and the 95 Theses. So, do you know any of the 95 theses? I didn’t think so. I don’t know many either. That’s okay. They’re not the Bible! But there’s one thesis that’s worth remembering—the very first one. He wrote: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

What’s that about? It really comes down to a simple question, “What is a Christian?” How would you define a Christian today? Some might say, “A Christian is someone with a cross around their neck.” Or maybe someone else would say, “Christians are those ‘holier than thou’ people who think they’re better than everyone else!” What is a Christian? Here’s how Martin Luther would have answered: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” To repent means to turn around—to do a 180. A Christian is someone who repents—who confesses his sin and turns around and trusts in Jesus—everyday!

So what does all that have to do with preparing for Christmas? I think God loves to see people preparing for Christmas. I think he loves to see people excited to celebrate his Son’s birth. Each one of us prepares in our own way. Fill in the blank for you: “My family is not ready for Christmas until we have...” A tree. Lights. Snow. Music. Cookies. Lefse....That’s good! God wants us to be excited for Christmas. It’s just that he doesn’t want you only to prepare your house. He wants you to prepare your heart. Have you prepared your heart for Christmas? Try to fill in the blank again: “My heart is not ready for Christmas until...” What would you say?

Preparing people's hearts for Jesus was so important to God that hundreds of years before Jesus' birth God promised to send someone whose specific job was to prepare people's hearts for Jesus. "It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'—'a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Preparing people's hearts was important! And God kept his promise: "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." It was John the Baptist's job to prepare hearts for Jesus.

And his job sounds like road construction. "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." Think of what road construction is like. Have you ever seen the cartoon movie Cars? Lightning McQueen—a famous race car—wrecked the road in a small town. His punishment was to fix the road. So, eager to get out of there, Lightning just slapped a new coat of asphalt on top of the cracks and potholes and thought he was done. Was he? Nope! It wasn't good enough to just throw some asphalt on top. He had to tear it out and start all over. You can't build a new road that's going to last without tearing out the old one. That's what repentance is. It's looking in our hearts for whatever cracks or potholes get in the way of Jesus. Then it's ripping out those sins and trusting in Jesus for forgiveness. That's repentance. It's road construction on our hearts!

It's just that we would much rather do what Lightning McQueen did—just slap Jesus on top. No construction. No repentance. No change. Just slap Jesus on top of our sin and think it's okay. Sometimes we treat Jesus like he's peanut butter. Are the bananas getting old? Just put some peanut butter on them! Don't like carrots? Put some peanut butter on them. Hard to take a pill? Put some peanut butter on it! How often don't we treat Jesus like peanut butter? Like this: "I'm set in my ways. I'm going to keep my pet sins. I'm going to keep living the way I want to. I'm going to throw Jesus on top and everything's going to be good." Like he's peanut butter.

If that's our attitude, then we're not Christians. Jesus didn't come to be a Band-Aid. He came to be our Savior. He isn't just something that you slap on top of your life. He's a life-changer. Because if he's really in your life, then he will make changes. You can't build a new road without tearing out the old one. If you don't want that, if you want to be set in your ways, then stay away from Jesus. Just realize that a heart that refuses to repent of its sin is a heart that says to Jesus, "Road closed." Do you know what the biggest problem in my world is? Me! Do you know what the biggest problem in your world is? You! Road construction is needed right here. Preparing for Jesus means, "Repent!"

Does that sound old-fashioned? Does it make you picture that strange guy on the street corner with a big sign—"Repent!" Crazy, right? In Jesus' day, that crazy man had a name—John the Baptist. "John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey." Sound crazy? Yet, "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were

baptized by him in the Jordan River." Why did people go out to this guy? They walked for miles into the desert to listen to a strange man in a fur coat tell them about their sins. Why? Because they knew it was true!

John was the one man willing to tell them the truth about themselves. They weren't what they were supposed to be. They sinned more than anyone else knew. They lived with guilt and shame. And John was willing to tell them the truth. They probably didn't like to hear it, but they knew it was true. So do you. You know it's true too. You are not what you need to be. No matter what anyone else says, those sinful desires that you have are not okay. You can have the most beautiful tree in the most beautiful house, but your heart is the most important Christmas preparation. And no one knows your sins better than you do. So we need to repent. We need to change. Not just once or twice. Every single day.

So maybe you're thinking, "I've got to change this and that and this..." That's a good thought. But you won't make it anywhere on your own. Here's the most important thing about repentance: You can't change yourself. God changes you. God doesn't just yell at us, "Change!" That would be like commanding a blind person to see. God says, "I'm going to change you!" God changes hearts through his Word. God shows us our sins. He breaks down our excuses and our defenses and our trust in ourselves. So that Jesus can enter. God's Word changes hearts. The more you hear God's Word, the more conscious you are of your sin. So the more you can see Jesus.

This change of repentance isn't something that we do on our own. In fact, it's something that God has already done in your heart. God changes hearts through Baptism. That's what John was all about, right? John the Baptist. He preached about a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." So which came first, baptism or repentance? The way John describes it, baptism worked repentance in people's hearts. It's all God's work! When you were baptized, Jesus forgave your sins. When you were baptized, God began to work in you godly repentance. It's all God's work!

Because God's Word and Baptism both point us to one thing: Jesus! This was John the Baptist's hard but beautiful message of repentance. You have sinned, but you don't have to hold onto that sin anymore. You don't have to feel guilty anymore. Sin doesn't control you. Christ does. You can take that sin—every sin—to Jesus and know that it's forgiven. Because Jesus died and rose to take it away. Jesus means no more Band-Aids. Jesus means no more hiding. Jesus means no more guilt. Jesus means you are forgiven. Everyday. Which way is better? Hiding and pretending with its guilt and shame. Or repenting and believing in Jesus with its forgiveness and peace.

It's just that once you come to faith in Jesus, the need for repentance doesn't stop. It's not a one-time thing—"I believe, so I'm set!" There is a daily battle for your heart. Your sinful nature vs. the Holy Spirit. Your way or God's way. Who's going to control you? John the Baptist shows us what a repentant heart of faith looks like. He said, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and