

3rd Sunday in Advent

December 16, 2018

Our Savior's Way
Worshipping Sundays 8:00, 9:30, & 11:00 AM
Pastor Mann

Gordon MacDonald is a Christian writer. He's also the chancellor of Denver Seminary. He tells a story about a Nigerian woman--a doctor at a big research hospital in the U.S. Her first name is Joy—at least that's her English name. Her African name is "omọ ti o gba ibinu kuro." "What a beautiful name." said Gordon MacDonald. "How did you get that name?" Dr. Joy explained: "My parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry. But they loved each other very much. They defied their families and were married anyway. For many years they were ostracized from both sets of parents. Then," Dr. Joy said, "my mother became pregnant with me. And when my grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of anger and hostility came down. I became the one who took the anger away. And that is the name my mother and father gave me." "Omo ti o gba ibinu kuro"—it would be a good name for Jesus. Jesus is the baby born to take God's anger away and reconcile us with our heavenly Father. Through the Child of Bethlehem, we receive forgiveness.

Do you know what name has been given to this Sunday? It's called "Joy Sunday." In ancient times, when the language of the Church was Latin, this Sunday was called "Gaudete"—which means "joy." That's why the color of this Sunday's candle in the Advent wreath is pink—not a somber blue, but a joyful pink. Listen to the echoes of joy in the Scripture readings--the Old Testament Reading—"Rejoice and exult with all your heart." The Epistle Reading—"Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice." Joy is the theme of the day.

But unfortunately, as we read the Gospel, we discover that there are some people who are not rejoicing at Jesus' coming. In today's Gospel, we read: ***“But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law would not listen. They refused to be baptized by John and they rejected God’s plan for themselves.”*** (Luke 7:30) Picture John, standing on the banks of the Jordan River. The sun is bright. The day is hot. People have traveled a long way on dusty roads to hear John--this desert prophet. He's a strange looking figure with long hair, a scraggly beard, and dressed in skins of moth-eaten camel hide. “You brood of vipers,” John declares. “You snakes! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?” (What a way to greet people at the beginning of a sermon. It's a long way from “Grace, mercy, and peace to you.”) But John has some hard words to say: “You snakes. You children of Satan. You need to repent. You're living in sin. Now is the time to change.” You look at the faces in the listening crowd. Some are shocked. Some are offended. But some are taking John's words to heart. They know in themselves—they are not living the kind of life that God wants. John is right. Their life needs to change and so one-by-one they begin to climb down the riverbank. They step into the water and make their way to John. And this strange-looking prophet from the desert dips them under the water and says, “Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more.” And suddenly their hearts fill with joy. Gaudete! Omo ti o gba ibinu kuro.

Do you remember back in October, on Reformation Day, we talked about the 95 Theses that Martin Luther nailed to the church door in Wittenburg? Listen to this--this is Thesis Number 1: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Those who listened to John the Baptist and answered his call—they wanted and needed a change in their lives. They understood what Martin Luther meant when he said that true repentance is not simply trying to clean up your act by changing a few unhealthy habits. True repentance involves a person's whole life. Not just one or two things, not just turning over a new life—but beginning a new life. That's where we get this idea of being “born again.” Repentance really is turning around and starting a new life. So, if you think about it, the act of repenting is only the beginning.

Look at it this way—imagine that the act of repentance is a man walking along the road in one direction and suddenly he realizes that he is walking in the opposite direction of where he should be going, so he stops and turns around and starts walking in the new direction. It's short, it's quick, and it's simple. Stop, turn around, walk the other way. But now think about someone riding on a bicycle. He realizes he's going in the wrong direction. In a sense, it's the same process. You stop, you turn around, and you start pedaling in a new direction. But it's a long process, isn't it?—to get turned around. You have to slow down. You have to get the bike turned around. You have to start pedaling again. Now think about driving in a car. You discover you are going in the wrong direction. Now you have to find a place to turn around. You have to watch for a place to pull off and maybe back up and it might be hard to maneuver and it takes even longer. Now, think about piloting a supertanker weighing hundreds of thousands of tons. It takes miles to slow that ship down and when you turn the wheel it takes a long time for the ship to respond and then the turn is huge, this immense arc that takes you way off course. And once you are headed in the right direction it takes a while to get up to speed again.

Now, apply this to repentance. Some sins are small and easy. We stop. We turn around. We walk the other way. No problem. Some sins, like the bicycle. These sins are a little more difficult. There is a process of slowing down and turning around and getting up to speed again. But some sins are enormous. In fact, we may not even recognize them as sins. But God gives us His grace and God works patiently in our lives and He carefully slows us down, as a captain does a ship so that he can bring us through the turn and head us in a new direction. Only then, when we are back on course, does he bring us back up to full speed.

There are two things I find helpful about this illustration. First, the idea that God does not work repentance in an instant. It is a process. It can take time. The awareness of sin and the desire to change can, at times, come gradually. God is bringing us to a full stop carefully. God is patient. We need to trust him. The second

idea has to do with the turning. If you've ever been behind the wheel of a large boat, you know that changing direction takes time. There is a period of time when it seems like the ship is not responding. It seems like you're not on the old course and not on the new course. There may even be times when we feel like we are dead in the water. But God is bringing us around—His Holy Spirit is doing its work--making sure we are headed in the right direction. And when we get back on course, we will pick up speed and godliness will grow. And we will be able to rejoice in the birth of the child who brings an end to anger. Joy. Gaudete! Omo ti o gba ibinu kuro.

But remember, I said there were two groups of people standing around listening to the preaching of John the Baptist. The first group repented of their sins. They were baptized by John and they determined to live a new and changed life. The second group were the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They were secure in their own righteousness—satisfied with their lives. Repentance was not for them. That was for other people. They saw no reason to change. The question is, as you listen to John's words today, in which group are you? Are you ready for and determined to change, or are you satisfied with the status quo—life as it is? If you have prayed for a change in your life, be patient and keep on praying. God has promised to work and he will. And in the end, you will be glad that he did it slowly and carefully.