

“Repent? Who, Me?”

Isaiah 40:1-5; Matthew 3:1-12

The Second Sunday of Advent, December 7, 2025

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Some of us, more likely our younger attendees, will be less familiar with the award-winning cartoon strip by Charles Schultz titled “Peanuts.” You, and they, may have seen television episodes like “A Charlie Brown Christmas” or “It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown.” The examples I cite in today’s message play off the sibling rivalry between Charlie Brown, the main character, and his older, sometimes bossy half-sister, Lucy Van Pelt. Their rivalry is often reflected in Lucy being unkind or blunt, the latter characteristic reflective of today’s words from John the Baptist.

The first vignette has Lucy coming to Charlie Brown saying *“Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown. Since it’s this time of the season, I think we ought to bury past differences and try to be kind.”* Charlie Brown asks, *“Why does it just have to be this time of the season? Why can’t it be all year long?”* Lucy looks at him and exclaims, *“What are you, some kind of fanatic?”*

Today’s Gospel is fanatical. No respecter of persons, John the Baptist called the religious people “snakes” and exhorts them to repent. To prepare for Messiah, everyone is called to repent: no exceptions.

To repent (Greek: “metanoia”) is literally “to turn” away from one thing and toward another: away from hurt and brokenness and toward healing and wholeness. It implies a change of heart, the kind of permanent life change that might, in fact, get us labeled a fanatic.

From what shall we turn away in Advent? Toward what?

Before we address those questions, we need to be honest in our resistance to the whole idea of repentance. “Repent? Who, Me?” is what we sometimes think, even if we don’t say it. We are like my family member of years ago, a more-or-less regular church attender, who once told me *“I don’t pray the unison prayers of confession because I don’t do those things that are mentioned.”* Really? Really. **None** of them? Ever? Uh-huh. (By the way, this was not Carol or any of our sons, just for the record!)

Or perhaps we associate repentance with the feeling of remorse. This feeling may be an authentic response to behavior that is not our best selves, but it is not repentance. It can lead to repentance, or it can be a kind of breast-beating that is a dismal spiritual relic of the past.

Besides, we tell ourselves, we're basically good people. To remember our mistakes, we tell ourselves, is just being negative; it brings us down. That response is a bit like the Rev. James W. Moore's preaching series on the Peabody Award-winning radio broadcast "The Protestant Hour," later published as a book: Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses.

On closer inspection, we're more like Lucy than we want to admit. Being a church member is all right, but let's not get fanatical. Let's not get too serious about discipleship. Besides, who wants to change?

Back to Lucy and Charlie Brown. Lucy is chasing Charlie Brown: *"I'll get you, Charlie Brown! I'll get you! I'll knock your block off!"* Charlie Brown, running away at full speed, stops, turns around and says, *"Wait a minute!" Hold everything! We can't carry on like this! We have no right to act this way...the world is filled with problems...people hurting other people...people not understanding other people...now, if we as children can't solve what are relatively minor problems, how can we ever expect to....."*

POW!!! Lucy hits Charlie Brown with a left to the jaw, knocking him out. She says, *"I had to hit him QUICK! He was beginning to make sense!"*

If this is beginning to make sense to you as it does to me, then we return to the questions *"From what are we going to turn this Advent? And towards what?"*

Things to omit are likely obvious - lying (or cleverly manipulating the truth), slander or other gossip, judging the behavior of another without knowing their circumstance, escaping life by substance abuse or abuse of relationships - these are abbreviations of a longer list of transgressions clear to most people.

Yet while habits and attitudes are a place to start, they are symptoms, not causes. The root cause is attachment solely to ourselves. Advent calls us to turn away from preoccupation with self, reliance wholly upon self,

life totally absorbed with self. This is not a spiritual shaking-of-the-finger and wagging-of-the-head. It is rather noting that destructive behaviors are extension of our fears: of insecurity, vulnerability, of having the discrepancy between our public and private lives exposed. Hurtful behavior is often a symptom of a hurting, fearful heart that hurts more, not less, when we try to “go it alone.”

One of the recurring vignettes between Charlie Brown and Lucy is on the baseball field, where Lucy is a terrible outfielder and constantly misses catching fly balls, often in critical situations. In one strip, Lucy has yet again failed to catch a fly ball, causing their team to lose. Lucy confesses to Charlie Brown that as the ball was coming toward her, she remembered all the other times she had dropped fly balls, concluding *“I’m sorry, Charlie Brown. The past got in my eyes.”*

As you and I seek to be faithful to what we know God wants of us, is the past getting in our eyes?

So if repentance is a turning away from sin, brokenness, failure and destructive behavior toward self and others, toward what then are we to turn? News flash: God! But wait: not God the sentimental grandfather who smiles benignly and never speaks an ill word. John the Baptizer was right: it’s not enough to say, *“we have Abraham as our father.”* That is to say that we’re good, or good enough, or have several excellent excuses if we’re not, or that we have a lineage of many generations in this church or in this community. God can raise up from stones children of Abraham, whether the century is the first or the twenty-first.

So turning toward God is about faithfulness to God before faithfulness to self. If we believe, as we are later taught in the ministry of Jesus, that the core of our faith is loving God and loving neighbor, then this outward focus on relationships—with God and neighbor—is on trust, respect and love. When we seek relationships and base our behavior on these, the good will come. Then the words of the prophet Isaiah are no longer words to placate us, they become words of truth:

“Comfort my people,” says our God. “Encourage the people...tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are forgiven.” (Isaiah 40:1-2)

This promise is true. When we believe it, we WANT to change, we WANT to turn toward this God who invites us to start anew, we WANT to prepare in the wilderness a highway for our God. And here's the clincher: God wants this for us, too! Not self-deprecation because of past failings, but openness to the God who, yes, holds us accountable but at the same time loves us so much that the consequences of our failings have been redeemed by Christ. God's promise has been sealed by the sacrifice of God's Son, the baby born in Bethlehem who is also the eternal Christ, whose love is perfect and whose gift of love on the cross is sufficient for all our sins. Turning again to God this Advent is a gift to ourselves and a gift to others but is finally our way of saying *"Thanks be to God."*

Repent? Yes, you. And me. Amen.