

St James United Church



Message for December 7, 2025 Second Sunday in Advent

“A Call to Prayerful Repentance” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12; “The whole world is your own,” a saying of Sri Sarada Devi in Eknath Easwaran, *Words to Live By* (www.spiritualityandpractice.com/quotes/quotations/view/30957/spiritual-quotations)

Here we go again. We are a week closer to December 25 and though the festive mood outside of church is in full swing, you’d still never know it based on the readings appointed for this Sunday. Not many of us put John the Baptist, dressed in camel hair, on our tree, and “You, brood of vipers” is not much of a festive greeting, not even for me, Grinchy as I am.

But I’m OK with that, and not just because I can be Grinchy. As I said last Sunday, this time of year is supposed to be about spiritual preparation. In that vein, John is decidedly on the money as he invites people to repent because God’s reign has come near. Each Christmas we affirm our belief that God’s reign has come near in the birth of Jesus, and in his adult life as well, all that he said and did revealing God’s deep love for the world, so much love that God draws near to us to reconcile us to each other and to restore creation.

Because of that, it’s easy for us to focus on Jesus’ soft side, his compassionate outreach to people in need, his healing and forgiving, including social outcasts at table with him. This is especially true at this time of year as we look forward to remembering his birth as a vulnerable baby. It makes John’s description of him carrying a winnowing fork to sift away the chaff quite jarring. But let’s not forget how Jesus tipped over the moneylenders’ tables and called religious leaders “whitewashed tombs,” quite like “brood of vipers.” Jesus could be like John. Living out God’s reconciling work meant at times he needed to confront those doing the opposite, challenge the religious elite who collaborated with the Romans. As far as he was concerned, they forfeited their moral authority when they stopped tending to the community and used their status for gain.

Jesus did this though, grounded in his relationship with God. He made prayer the centre point of his ministry, taking time alone, praying as he healed, prayerfully discerning important decisions, speaking to God as part of his teaching ministry. And as much as he drew on prayer in moments when he extended God’s compassion, even more so it enabled him to confront those who hurt others, challenge the injustice he saw around him, and to invite his followers to do the same, always with love. Jesus understood that the reconciliation we need, that the restored creation God promises, was more than a social or political concern, that the root issue was spiritual.

John’s “brood of vipers” epithet points to this. He was effectively calling the religious leaders “sons of serpents.” The image evokes the first humans seduced into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, after which they were expelled from Eden. The story captures our

nagging feeling of paradise lost, that we once were close to God, lived at peace with each other, were in harmony with the natural world, but then it all went wrong, replaced with alienation from God, a soul wound that leads us to exploit the natural world and to be at odds with each other. Each Christmas we press pause on those tendencies as we give to charity, extend good will, even lay down arms for a time. I'm sure that like me, you wish that we'd keep that all year long.

It's why we're called to repent each Advent. Repentance starts with prayer, seeking God at our centre as Jesus did. It is an invitation to seek God's Spirit, to discover that the alienation we feel is actually false. Jesus' birth reveals that God never withdrew from us so much as we closed ourselves to their presence. When we recognize that, seek that, we can be filled with the Spirit like the ideal ruler in Isaiah. As Christians, we associate Jesus with that ruler but as his disciples we're joined to him, his grace working in us. In prayer and contemplation, we open ourselves to that grace. We sit in stillness long enough to be honest about ourselves, to be honest about our actions, to let God show us our wounds and how they trigger the same, to let God heal those too. We feel God's reconciling love and feel called to extend it as we see where we need to ask for forgiveness of others, other humans and of the more than human as well.

In this we can be tempted to reduce repentance to personal wrongdoing and there is an element of that. I hinted at it last Sunday when I suggested we try and see Christ in someone cutting us off in the parking lot or grabbing the last turkey. I know too well that I could be the one doing either of those, and when that happens, I need to look at what I've done and then put things right. In that moment I didn't view the other person as a friend, only a stranger and so not my concern. Yet my action has an impact, souring that stranger's day and shaping how they engage others, including loved ones. That makes our world less peaceful.

But we need to look beyond the personal. The ripple effect of our actions is a reminder of just how connected we are, part of a wider community, all our actions having social impact. John knew that as he baptized people in the Jordan River, inviting them to recommit to the way of life their ancestors put into practice when they crossed the river, the cooperative society described in Torah, before they emulated the unjust ways of the empires that conquered them. Jesus knew this too, was willing to stand against those ways, but more often simply modeled the cooperative society rooted in God's reign of peace. In this he showed what reconciliation between us and restoration of creation looks like, what God's reign looks like. He calls us to the same, to model it where we can, to be honest when we aren't doing so, and to seek it in our wider world, always with love. As we do we the wolf and lamb eat together. How? Because the child, us, is no longer seduced by the serpent's lies, but lives a way that that grounded in God's closeness, God's love.

So let us make repentance part of our Advent preparation, taking time in prayer to see where we are called to make changes in our lives, changes that foster peace in our world. The world as it can make many of us feel a bit Grinchy, even in this festive season, but that feeling is actually a hint that we want something more. May we seek that, heeding John's call for repentance. As we do we open a space for God's Reign of peace to be born. May it be so. Amen.