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Sermon: “A Chance to Live Again” (Matthew 3:1-12)
December 5, 2010

One of my favorite parts of this time of year is watching my all-time favorite movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, the classic 1946 film starring James Stewart, who plays the part of George Bailey. George is burdened with the task of sustaining a struggling building and loan company. At one point in the film one of the employees loses a huge sum of money and George is threatened with going to prison and losing everything—his job, his family, his reputation. Having been told he was worth more dead than alive because of his life insurance policy, George stands on a bridge considering killing himself when his guardian angel, Clarence, jumps in the river. After being fished out of the river by George, Clarence gives him a glimpse of what the world would be like without him. Near the end of the film George is completely undone and returns to the bridge and cries out to God: “I want to live again. I want to live again. Please God, let me live again.”

In the gospel lesson for today, the Second Sunday of Advent, we see many people who, like George Bailey are burdened and looking for the chance to live again. John the Baptist had begun preaching a very simple message in the wilderness of Judea: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Many people from Jerusalem and Judea were hastening to the wilderness to confess their sins and be baptized by John in the Jordan River. The burden of their sins was too much for them to bear anymore. They needed relief. They wanted to live again.

And it’s not just George Bailey or the people from today’s Gospel lesson who are burdened. Everyone is burdened, weighed down in one way or another with something that is bigger than them. Some wear a burdened expression on their face while others may hide it behind a smile, but everyone is burdened in one way or another. Some are burdened with a sickness that has no cure or debt that appears too massive to ever pay off. Others are burdened with dysfunctional relationships that seem to only be getting even more dysfunctional as time goes by. Still others are burdened with unrelenting stress at work or trying to find a job in the first place. Still others are burdened with self-hatred, or addictions, or other self-destructive things.
But there is an even greater burden than all these, a burden with which everyone struggles, a burden that is too much for anyone to bear: the burden of sin. Last week Paul preached about original sin, the darkness that is in all of us.

Sin is the heaviest burden of all.

There is only one way for us to address the burden of sin, and that is to repent, as John the Baptist preached: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah, a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth. An angel had told Zechariah that his son John would “turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God” and “with the spirit and power of Elijah… make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:16-17).

The entire message of all the Old Testament prophets can be summarized in one word: repent. When John the Baptist came onto the scene it had been four centuries since there had been a prophet preaching repentance in Israel. In fact, four hundred years earlier God had spoken through the prophet Malachi that He would send Elijah again to preach repentance, and Jesus identified John the Baptist as fulfilling this prophesy (Malachi 4:5 and Matthew 11:14). Like Elijah in the days of old John the Baptist lived an austere life in the wilderness, clothed with camel hair and a leather belt, living on a diet of locusts and wild honey. And John preached the same message Elijah preached: repent.

To repent is more than feeling bad about sin or being sorry for it. The biblical scholar D. A. Carson describes repentance as “not a merely intellectual change of mind or mere grief, still less doing penance, but a radical transformation of the entire person, a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action” (D A Carson, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, p. 99).

To repent is to make a u-turn of the entire direction of one’s life.

There are two sides to repentance: *turning away* from what is wrong and *turning to* God, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: “You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (I Thessalonians 1:9).
We see both sides of repentance clearly in the baptism liturgy in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Those being baptized *turn away* from what is wrong by renouncing “Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God;” renouncing “the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God;” and renouncing “all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God.” After renouncing, turning away from, these things, those being baptized *turn to* God, as the celebrant asks, “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior… Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?” (p. 302).

Repentance is urgent. It is not food for thought or something to take into consideration for a later time. It is a life and death issue that calls for immediate action. In today’s lesson when the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John was urgent: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

We are often bombarded with advertisements urging us to act now, to not put it off another second, but we know that at the end of the day, when it comes to buying things we don’t have to act now—that instead it often makes sense to “sleep on it” before making a major purchase (some of us have learned that the hard way 😊). But when it comes to repentance it indeed makes sense to act now, to not put it off another second.

Putting off repentance is always a bad move. Putting off repentance only makes the burden of sin heavier. I was having lunch with someone once and he was honest with me about sin in his life. He knew it was wrong but he did not want to repent—“But you know,” he said, “it’s really wearing me out.” Putting off repentance does just that, it wears us out. The burden of sin just gets heavier and heavier. Like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s classic play, when we try to cover up the sins in our lives, the burden just gets heavier and heavier and in time can literally drive us to the breaking point.

The burden of sin causes much damage, damage to us and damage to others. Last week I read one of T. S. Eliot’s plays, *The Cocktail Party*. One of the main characters, Edward, is listening to one of the guests at the cocktail party, Henry, who is describing the fragile state of Edward’s marriage to his wife Lavinia: “You
made a decision,” Henry tells Edward, “You set in motion forces in your life and in the lives of others which cannot be reversed.”

A number of years ago I took a few dozen high school students on a ski trip. One of the students was named Chris, a huge kid who played on the offensive line of his football team. His nickname was “Freight Train.” The problem was, while Chris was a great football player, he was a clueless skier. Late one afternoon I watched in horror as Chris was flying down the slope, screaming “Look out! Watch out!” He was leaning way back on his skis, poles straight out to his sides, mowing down the skiers who were unable to dive out of his way. At the bottom of the slope he wiped out, skidding into a group of skiers standing in a lift line. Although Chris knocked many people down, nobody was hurt, so that night we all had a great laugh about it. (From then on almost every time we saw Chris someone would cry, “Look out, watch out—here comes Freight Train!” 😊). When we find ourselves flying downhill in sin we run the risk of not only hurting others on the way down, but experiencing an eternal wipeout at the end.

Repentance, turning away from sin and turning to God is not a one-time event in our lives. While there may be an initial repentance when we first hear the gospel or receive Christ, we don’t stop sinning after that initial repentance has happened. Like the nineteenth-century humorist Josh Billings, a contemporary of Mark Twain, once wrote: “It is much easier to repent of sins that we have committed than to repent of those we intend to commit.”

In his Letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul addressed this head on, as he wrote: “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (7:18-19).

So what do we do? We repent… and we repent again… and we keep on repenting. We keep turning away from the world, the flesh, and the devil and turning back to God. We keep turning away from sin and turning back to God, for the good news of the Gospel is that as Paul also wrote to the Romans, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1).

One of the most important parts of our worship each week is the confession. In the Rite One confession we see that repentance brings relief from the burden of sin, as
we pray: “We do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable” (BCP 331). In the Rite Two confession we simply say, “We are truly sorry and we humbly repent” (BCP 331 and 360). Confession is all about repentance.

And what happens when we confess our sins to God? What happens when we repent? God forgives us and takes the burden of sin away. Scripture tells us, “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9).

Repentance brings relief.

But this repentance is not something we do in and of ourselves. We repent in response to the love of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We repent in response to the love of God, for scripture tells us that it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). For one of those who came to the wilderness to be baptized by John was none other than Jesus Christ, whom John identified as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

In fact, Jesus actually preached the exact same message as John: “Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). But Jesus did much more than preach repentance, He took the judgment for our sins upon himself. He took the damage that our sin does to us upon himself. He took the damage that our sin does to others upon himself. The ax was laid to the root of his tree, the cross, and he died in our place.

Scripture tells us that we are fully known and fully loved by God, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us, that Jesus came into the world not condemn us but to save us, that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 5:8; John 3:17; and Romans 8:39).

Our repentance is in response to the love of God in Jesus Christ. In his classic devotional, My Utmost for His Highest, Oswald Chambers describes this:

“It is not repentance that saves me; repentance is the sign that I realize what God has done in Christ Jesus… Is it my obedience that puts me right with God? Never! I am put right with God because prior to all else, Christ died.
When I turn to God and by belief accept what God reveals, instantly the stupendous atonement of Jesus Christ rushes me into a right relationship with God. By the miracle of God's grace I stand justified, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Jesus has done” (Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, October 28).

Moreover, it is the Holy Spirit who opens our hearts to the love of God. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to repent, for “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians 12:3), and “it is God who is at work in (us), enabling (us) both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). It is the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts to urge us to repent, to turn away from sin and turn to God, to experience relief from the burden of sin.

Moreover, repentance not only gives us relief, it gives God joy, for Jesus taught, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

So if today you are feeling the burden of sin in your life, perhaps the Holy Spirit is moving your heart to do the only thing that will bring relief: repent.

Let’s return for just a moment to the film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Remember the prayer George Bailey prays on the bridge? “I want to live again. I want to live again. Please God, let me live again.” God answered that prayer, but it gets better. George arrives home just moments before his home is flooded with people from the community who all pitch in money to bail him out of trouble. George doesn’t contribute a cent; it was all covered freely and willfully by his friends and neighbors, simply because they loved him and wanted to take his burden away.

And that is exactly what Jesus did for us. He died on the cross to take our burden of sin away, completely, 100%. He did it freely and willfully. In response to the downhill velocity of our sin Jesus ascended the hill of Calvary and through His death set in motion a force in our lives that can never be reversed, the forgiveness of God. Where sin abounds, the grace of God abounds more (Romans 5:20). When we repent, God gives us relief from the burden of sin, because He bore that burden on Calvary.

When we repent God gives us the chance to live again. Amen.