

FINDING CHRISTMAS GIFTS IN UNUSUAL PLACES

The Gift of Starting Over

Matthew 3:1-12

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December 8, 2019, Second Week of Advent

WATCH/LISTEN: fbjc.org/sermon/finding-christmas-gifts-in-unusual-places-the-gift-of-starting-over/

Perhaps you've read about the woman in Vermont who has a collection of 1,400 nativity sets. Let me hurriedly say: I don't have that many. But I have several. This week, I placed several Nativity sets out in my office, a yearly ritual I enjoy. I love to collect nativity scenes and putting them out for display is one of my favorite Advent things to do. As I put the last pieces in place, I really felt a glow inside and asked myself why this tiny act becomes so sacramental and worshipful. I decided that at least part of it is the beginning again, starting over. The rolling of the recurring season lets us clear the slate and begin again.

Starting over is the meaning of repentance and that was John's message and Jesus'. It means to change the mind, to go beyond the present mind and to turn. I love the story about the man who burst into the local newspaper office, irate. "You listed me in yesterday's obituary notices as dead. I'm alive," he thundered. A cub reporter replied, "We never print retractions, but I'll tell you what we'll do. We will list you in today's birth announcements and give you a fresh start!"

Concerning this starting over, this repentance, I have a few questions. FIRST, why is repentance so difficult to do? The answer is pretty obvious. We have to be rescued from our own egos. If we had our way, we would just continue to focus on appearances and pretending. But God loves us too much to let us get by with that. Nothing is as freeing as hearing the truth about our lives and taking responsibility for our own choices.

Here's a SECOND question. Why is repentance always about the other person? Have you noticed that? Our first clue is that in John the Baptist's day, only Gentiles, outsiders, were baptized. Yet John is baptizing good, upstanding, pedigreed Jews. Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious elite of the day, knew scripture and knew the right people. They thought because Abraham was biologically their father, they had their spiritual immunization shots. No. John called them a nest of snakes.

The message is that we can clean up the outside without changing anything on the inside. Standing and singing in church does not make us right with God any more than sleeping in our garage makes us a car.

Here is a THIRD question. Why is repentance always viewed as a negative thing? We always talk about what we are repenting from when John and Jesus invited us to look at what we are repenting toward. Let's try an analogy. Suppose you were digging ditches for a living, back-breaking work, long hours, not much pay. A lawyer walks up to you and tells you that you just

inherited one million dollars. What would you do? You would leave your shovel. You don't need it anymore.

When we repent, when we start over, we get to leave behind all that stuff we don't need anymore. Matthew describes John's preaching as a fulfillment of Isaiah 40. That was God's call to Israel in exile to come home. So the repentance call is a call to come back to our real home in God. A place of forgiveness, love, grace, mercy.

Did you ever wonder why people flocked to hear John preach? He was weird. Strange clothing, strange diet, strange man. They came because they were weary of what was not working in their lives. External religion with no power to change. Repeated cycles of trying hard, then broken promises.

John announced that if we are willing to repent, to start over, a new power would invade us—God's presence, the Holy Spirit. If I place a glove on this music stand and tell it to pick up this Bible, nothing happens. But what if I put myself inside the glove? Then there is power. In this Advent season, God doesn't shout down from heaven a list of ought-to's and orders. God comes down. And God's power means life can change.