

**Alisa Carmichael**  
**December 4, 2010**  
**Sermon #3**

**Advent 2 – Year A**

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19  
Romans 15:4-13  
Matthew 3:1-12

What guides your life? How do you know when you are traveling in the right direction? What serves as your compass and points to north? Perhaps a better question for today might be: what is your GPS, showing you where you are and where you are heading? In today's gospel reading, John the Baptist says if you aren't relying on God to guide and direct your life, you are heading in the wrong direction. You need to get off the road and turn around. You need to repent.

"Repent" is an odd-sounding word to our ears. It makes us think about the cartoon version of an Old Testament prophet—long white robe, long white beard, big sign which says "REPENT—THE END IS NEAR." At first glance, John does seem a bit like this, dressed in a camel hair coat and living off locusts and honey. However, if you look more closely at John and how his ministry was intertwined with that of Jesus, his words become a powerful message for us today and a call to prepare our own hearts during this Advent season.

We learn about John from all four gospels: all have the story of Jesus' baptism but each also gives us other information about who John was. The gospel of Luke records that before Gabriel visited Mary to tell her that she would conceive and bear a son, he visited a priest named Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth would also have a son, who would be named John. Elizabeth was Mary's cousin. Elizabeth and Zechariah were "devout and upright people," but, as in many Old Testament stories, Elizabeth was barren and they were both well on in years. Gabriel tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a son who "will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his very birth; and he will bring back

many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will go before him as a forerunner, possessed by the spirit and power of Elijah.....to prepare a people that shall be fit for the Lord.”

Zechariah is terrified by the angel’s visitation. Perhaps that is why he rather unwisely questions the validity of Gabriel’s pronouncement and for this lapse in judgment loses his power of speech until after John’s birth. When the baby is presented for circumcision on the eighth day, the neighbors and relatives doubt Elizabeth’s choice of names because John is not a family name. They ask Zechariah what he would like his son to be called and Zechariah is quick to write: “His name is John.” (A wise choice!)

John is filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth and he always recognizes who Jesus truly is. Mary visits Elizabeth when they are both pregnant, and Elizabeth reports that her baby “leapt up” in her womb in recognition of the Christ Child that Mary is carrying. Remember that Jesus’ early ministry was not accepted by the people in his home town and was initially questioned by the rest of his family, but his cousin John always knows who Jesus is. I have wondered why, when he is imprisoned, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one or they should look for another. Had John become discouraged and given up hope? Perhaps a better interpretation is that this was for the benefit of John’s disciples, who, like Jesus’ disciples later, misunderstood the events they were witnessing.

John knew who Jesus was but he also knew who he himself was and what his personal ministry was. Before Jesus had even started his ministry, John was drawing crowds “from all Judea and the whole Jordan valley.” People were flocking to confess their sins and be baptized by John. Even the local religious authorities, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were turning out to see what he might say and on whose side of the fence he might land. Pretty heady stuff! It would be easy for most of us, in John’s position, to look around at our growing popularity and notoriety and decide that we might be a real celebrity after all. John, however, always knows that his role is to be, as Gabriel said, a forerunner sent to prepare the way for someone whose very sandals John was not fit to untie. Perhaps it was this very real humility that allowed Jesus to come for baptism to his cousin John.

John had two very specific messages for the gathering crowds. The first was, quite simply, “Repent!” So what exactly did this repentance mean for John’s listeners then and for us today?

Judaism recognizes two types of repentance: repenting out of fear of punishment and repenting out of deep love of God. Repentance from fear transforms sins committed intentionally to sins committed through oversight or ignorance, thereby lessening the severity of the offense. Repentance borne from love, however, changes sins committed intentionally into *merits*. The Talmud says: “The place occupied by those who have repented cannot be attained by even the most righteous person.” The root of the Hebrew word for repentance means to return, implying that God’s ways are the standard for our lives and straying from this is deviating from what should be our norm. To repent means to correct our deviation from the norm, to go back, to change direction.

One priest I know compares repentance to finding that you are traveling in the wrong direction on the interstate: the best thing for you to do when that happens is to get off at the nearest exit, turn around, and start heading back the way you came. I understand this analogy well. I have had plenty of experience with this. In Louisville, KY, there is a hotel on the river where conferences are usually held. I have seen this hotel in my rear view mirror as I continued on I-65 across the river to Indiana, having failed to identify the right exit on the KY side of the river. Here in Florida, I have done the same, getting in the wrong lane exiting the airport and finding myself flying by mistake across the seven mile stretch of the Howard Franklin Bridge. I understand the need to turn around and go back; however, my personal experience of repentance is usually a bit more complicated.

I am directionally challenged. Whether that is a verifiable medical syndrome, I don’t know. I just know that I tend to get lost, sometimes in spite of my very best efforts to get from here to there. My family recognizes this about me. When we moved to Tampa recently, my daughter got us--that is, me--a GPS. His name is Daniel and he has an Australian accent. I don’t need him now on a regular basis

but he has been helpful in barking out directions during travels and rather testily telling me to make corrections if I get off course. Sometimes, however, even Daniel can't help me.

What happens to me goes something like this: say for example that I have a Very Important Interview in a location that is new to me. I check my directions on the internet, Mapquest, Google and more. I set my GPS with the right address. I leave early to give myself some extra time. I've got my power suit on, resume in hand and all my ducks lined up neatly in a row. I think I've got it all together and I'm doing OK. I'm *almost* to my destination, just one more left turn in .3 miles, and then suddenly I realize that there is something wrong with my directions! Mapquest is telling me to turn left here, but it's a one-way street and I can't turn there.

I think: "That's OK, I'll just go up to the next block, hang a left, and double back." So I turn when I can, all while trying to check my printed directions and my GPS (which has usually become strangely silent at this point). That turn leads to another and even another and suddenly I am flying down a strange road with no landmarks and no directions. I don't know where I am but I'm pretty sure I'm speeding farther away from where I need to be by the minute and I seem to be surrounded by drivers who are all on their cell phones and determined not to let me change lanes to get off the road. My extra fifteen minute cushion is long gone and I'm seeing my Very Important Interview slipping away.

I feel lost, really lost. I know that I no longer have it all together and I know I can't fix this on my own. That's what it feels like to me to repent. Repentance is the experience in which my trust and reliance shift to God and I realize that all the ways I try to run my life my own way are meaningless. Anything that I trusted for my security outside of my relationship with God will ultimately fail. "Repent! The kingdom of Heaven is upon you!" It is when we repent that we are near the Kingdom.

The truth is that we are all directionally challenged. It is part of our human condition that we stray from our place with God. The hymn writer says: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it! Prone to leave the God I love." We have all been in that situation where we are flying down the road of life, steering by

our own lights and thinking we know where we are going and how to get there. We've planned our course and the GPS of the world around us is barking directions at us, telling us what we need to buy and wear and do to be happy.

But we aren't happy.

At some point, we realize we are heading in the wrong direction, down the wrong road. It may be something dramatic and life-shattering. Or it may just be that small voice inside that keeps whispering that we aren't living the life God meant for us. Either way, it's time to repent, turn around, and come back to the God who loves us.

That's where John's second message comes in: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

There are many references in the Old and New Testament to "being fruitful" but John specifies fruit that is "worthy of repentance." This type of "fruit" is different. It is not just producing "good fruit" or doing good works but showing through your works that your life is profoundly changed, that you are a new person in a renewed relationship with God.

The point here is that the works alone don't make the difference. We aren't earning our salvation by good deeds or deserving special status because we claim to be Christians. Remember that "brood of vipers," as he called the Pharisees and Sadducees? John warned that they were relying on the forms and practices of their religion and their heritage as Abraham's descendants rather than right relationship with God. We might be tempted to cast the Pharisees and Sadducees in their usual role of New Testament villain, but actually we don't get off easily here either. John could just as easily tell us: "Do you think you are righteous because you are a Christian? Because you are a Christian in a country where it is safe and acceptable to sit in church on Sunday morning?! I tell you that God can make Christians from those stones out in the parking lot!" Forms and appearance matter to the world but not to God. Only a changed heart and life will do.

That little cartoon prophet with the doom-and-gloom message says “Repent! The End is Near!” but John’s message is different. John brings a message of hope: “Repent! A New Beginning is Here!” John is the forerunner, telling his listeners to prepare their hearts and lives for the coming Messiah. As we wait during this Advent season, let us also repent and bear fruit worthy of repentance as we prepare for the coming of the Christ Child and the second coming of our Lord. Amen!

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**Sermon Outline: Repent and Bear Fruit****I. Introduction**

- A. Guide/Compass/GPS for life?
- B. Old Testament prophet: Repent! The End is Near

**II. John the Baptist**

- A. Zechariah and Elizabeth
- B. Gabriel's visit
- C. Filled with the Holy Spirit
- D. Forerunner of Jesus
- E. Always recognizes Jesus
- F. Knows who he is and what his ministry is

**III. Repentance**

- A. From fear
- B. From love
- C. God's ways are the standard/norm

**IV. Getting lost and turning around**

- A. Missing my exit
- B. Getting lost
- C. Directionally challenged

**V. Bearing fruit**

- A. Showing repentance by a changed life
- B. Sadducees & Pharisees: false security

**VI. Conclusion**

- A. Message of Doom: Repent! The end is near!
- B. Message of Hope: Repent! A new beginning is here!
- C. Prepare for the coming of the Christ Child and the Second Coming