

## **Sermon for January 8, 2010**

### **A Model for the New Year**

#### **Mark 1:4-11**

#### **Rev. Roger Pancost**

Whenever I read the story of John the Baptizer proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, I think of old fashioned tent revivals that were held throughout the United States. An Alabama resident named, Jean Butterworth, offers these memories of the tent revivals that she attended as a young person:

“It takes hot summer heat, a very large tent set up on a vacant lot, lots of saw dust on the ground and folding chairs. I left out the platform where the Preacher conducts the service. The crowd was composed of all the folks in the different churches in the community who participated in the long ten day tent revivals.

The services were usually at night. When seated on those hard folding chairs the people began fanning with those funeral fans on a stick, children began fidgeting and crying, and sweat started running down their shirts and blouses.

As the sermon processed, the preacher began to beat his Bible with his hand and cry out in a loud voice for the people to repent! The tent revivals I attended in Tuscaloosa in the late forties were conducted by Evangelist Eddie Martin. He always wore a white sports coat. (Why I remember that I don't know.)

One of my friends from south Alabama remembered that when she was small, the kids in the neighbor went to the revival meetings for entertainment. It seems that when the preacher got to preaching so loud and dramatically that it stirred up the crowd for immediate action. He preached about repenting of their vices so that they felt moved to throw them outside the tent. Out went their whisky flasks, chewing tobacco, snuff and cigarettes! What was so funny to the kids was that there was always someone standing outside the tent that would catch all the “Vices” thrown outside the tent!”

(Old Time Tent Revivals by Jean Butterworth, Alabama Pioneers: The Alabama Genealogy Resource! December 19, 2011, [alabambapioneers.com](http://alabambapioneers.com))

These images that Jean Butterworth offers of tent revivals are the same images that come to my mind whenever I hear the word “repent.” I think of a fiery preacher yelling at others to repent of their sins and get right with the Lord. My bias is that many of these evangelist used religion as a way to make money and gain fame. Through manipulations and guilt these evangelist changed behaviors for a moment in time, but people often went right back to their “vices.”

For many people the word repent has a negative connotation. This morning I invite us to reclaim this word and consider using the concept of repentance as a model for approaching this new year. Rather than seeing repentance in terms of punishment, we can see it as an invitation to a healthier and more positive life.

According to Jewish tradition repentance is known as *teshuvah*, which means “turning” or “returning.” To repent is to turn away from those things that hinder our relationship with God, back towards the ways of God. In other words, turning away from those things that are harmful to us, and to others, to those things which are life-giving and loving.

The act of repentance is not something that we do once in our lifetime. It is a process that we engage in throughout our lives. In some respects, it is a process that we engage in on a daily basis. The first step in the process is acknowledging the need for changes in our behaviors and attitudes.

Professor, Louis E. Newman, who is an expert on the Jewish practice of *teshuvah*, writes about the process of repentance saying that it, “...entails nothing less than a radical transformation of our selves and our relationship to others. It requires profound psychological self-awareness, which includes both recognizing our own moral blind spots and exploring the character traits that cause our moral lapses in the first place.”

Professor Newman goes on to say this about repentance, “It demands that we take full responsibility for our behavior, without hesitation or equivocation, and then take action to undo the effects of that behavior on others. And if this were not enough, Judaism teaches that the process of *teshuvah* is never really finished. Each time we have an opportunity to make the same mistake again, we need to renounce the past and choose a different pat.”

(Louis E. Newman is the John M. and Elizabeth W. Musser Professor of Religion and the Humphrey Doermann Professor of Liberal Learning at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn. He is the author most recently of “Repentance: The Meaning and Practice of Teshuvah,” published this year by Jewish Lights.)

The start of a new year is a perfect time to do a moral inventory of our lives. We begin by asking, “What are the things in my life that are harming me?” For many of us there is a need to repent of the way we treat our bodies. Overeating, consuming the wrong foods and lack of exercise are ways that we do damage to our health. There are some people who may be holding on to damaging emotions such as anger, or a sense of worthlessness. Sometimes we do damage to ourselves by over-working, or not taking the time we need for sleep and restoration.

As we continue our moral inventory it is helpful to ask, “What are the things in my life that are hurtful to others?” While I don’t imagine that anyone in this sanctuary intentionally thinks of ways to harm other people, there are times in which each one of us causes such harm. There may be things that we have said to another individual this past year that have hurt that person. We may be neglecting people we care about. We may not have said, “I love you” enough to the people who are important to us. Perhaps we have known of a need and turned the other way.

As we continue our moral inventory we can include this question, “What are the things in my life that are damaging to earth?” Our reading from the book of Genesis reminds us that the earth is a precious gift that each one of us has a responsibility caring for it.

When doing a moral inventory each one of us will have different answers to these questions. The behaviors and attitudes that cause harm in my life may not be the same as the ones in your life.

In our Christian Tradition, repentance leads to confession, which in turn leads to forgiveness. Forgiveness does not give us the freedom to continue engaging in the same hurtful behaviors. It frees us to move forward in a positive manner and reclaim our role in the work of God’s Kingdom.

Professor Newman points out that there are a lot of obstacles to the path of true repentance. These include ego, self-deception, dishonesty, stubbornness and the need for approval. He goes on to say, “The costs of ignoring the work of repentance are not easily quantifiable, but the evidence is all around us. We see it in the lives of public figures — politicians and corporate executives — who get caught in some deceitful or fraudulent behavior, and then baldly deny it.

We see it on daytime television shows, where people confess their transgressions before a live audience, never displaying a hint of the contrition or soul searching that is the mark of repentance.

Most of all, we know it in those quiet moments in our own lives when we recognize that we are not living up to our own moral standards, yet don't know how to restore our own sense of wholeness and integrity.”

Despite the challenges involved in the process of repentance, it leads to greater health, wholeness and peace in our lives.

I hope that I haven't sounded like a condemning Tent-Revival evangelist this morning, but rather a caring pastor, who wishes to encourage all of us to turn from that which harms us, back towards the ways of God. I also hope that if you decide to throw your vices out of the tent that no one is outside catching them.