

“A Preacher With Only One Sermon”

December 12, 2021

Luke 3:1-18

Westminster, Greenville

3rd Sunday of Advent (9am)

Ben Dorr

Before we begin, I need to give you fair warning, you’ve heard this sermon before.

I don’t mean I’m repeating a sermon today.

I mean John the Baptist is repeating his sermon today.

You see, John had only one sermon, as best as I can tell.

And you’ve heard it before.

It comes to us most often during the season of Advent.

John’s sermon goes like this: “Repent!”

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

Do you know what that means—to repent?

The literal translation is “to turn”.

In other words, to turn around, to go the other direction, to stop heading the wrong way and start heading the right way.

What does it mean, in my life and your life—to repent?

Earlier this spring, *Teen Vogue* named a new, 27-year-old editor-in-chief named Alexi McCammond. She was a rising star in the publishing world, but before she ever began the job, she was forced to resign.

Why did she resign?

Because one of the staff at *Teen Vogue* raised everyone's awareness about some things that Ms. McCammond had tweeted 10 years earlier, as a teenager.

They were awful and indefensible tweets, homophobic and racist in nature, things that Ms. McCammond never should have said. And Ms. McCammond admitted as much.

Back in 2019, when the tweets first came to light, she expressed her remorse and apologized. When the issue was raised again this spring, she apologized again, and acknowledged that there was no excuse for what she had said as a 17-year-old.

But the outrage on the internet was too much. And Ms. McCammond stepped down before she began her new job.¹

Now there are any number of questions one can ask about all this.

- Should she have been forced to resign after admitting that what she did was wrong?
- Does it matter that she was a teenager when she wrote what she did?

My question is this: did she repent?

This isn't a loaded question.

It's an honest question.

She took responsibility for what she once said.

She expressed remorse more than one time.

Is that what it looks like to repent?

¹ I am indebted to a blog post by Michael Jenkins, [Why the Very Concept of Grace Is Held in Contempt | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church \(scapc.org\)](https://www.scapc.org/why-the-very-concept-of-grace-is-held-in-contempt/), for this discussion of Alexi McCammond.

One could make a good case that it is.

When John Gruden, the former head coach of the Las Vegas Raiders resigned in October after it was discovered that he had, a number of years earlier, sent emails with homophobic and racist and misogynistic comments, Gruden said:

“I’m sorry, I never meant to hurt anyone.”

Not: “I’m sorry, what I said was very wrong.”

He has since sued the NFL.

And as best as I can tell, he has never admitted that what he said was wrong or sinful in any way.

Gruden’s response does NOT sound to me like repentance.

Repentance means to turn around.

To go the other direction.

May I suggest another way of framing it?

It means **to return to God**.

Many prophets who came along before John put it precisely this way:

The prophet Jeremiah:

“I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord...I will be their God, for they shall return to me...”

The prophet Joel:

“Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful...”

The prophet Zechariah:

“Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: Return to me...and I will return to you...’”

I like that way of talking about repentance.
Repentance is more than apologizing.
It’s returning.

Not returning to old grudges or harmful habits or sinful stereotypes.

But returning to the God who calls us to live as NEW people, changed people, forgiven people, redeemed people...

One of the reasons I like RETURNING as a way to think about repenting is that we’ve spoken so much during the past two years about returning, right?

Returning to normal,
returning to worship,
returning to school,
returning to the office...

One of the most joyful experiences for me this past fall has been hearing any number of you tell me, after worship, “This was the first time I’ve returned to the sanctuary in 18 months!”

--and to see the light and love in your eyes
when you told me that!

So what does it mean for us to return to God?

In a TED talk that she gave a few years ago, Kate Bowler describes what it was like to be told that she had stage IV cancer.

She was 35 years old at the time, she was married to her high school sweetheart, and she “had finally gotten pregnant after years of infertility.” Their son Zach was born, a healthy baby boy. In addition, Bowler had received “the first job [she] applied for in academia”...she was, in her words, “finally living the life [that she] wanted.”

But a few months before, she had started feeling pain in her stomach and had gone to every expert to find out why.

No one could tell me, she recalls.

And then, out of the blue, [a] physician’s assistant called me...to tell me that I had stage IV cancer, and that I was going to need to come to the hospital right away. And all I could think of to say was, “But I have a son. I can’t end. This world can’t end. It has just begun.”

Bowler goes on:

I am a historian and an expert in the idea that good things happen to good people. I research a form of Christianity nicknamed “the prosperity gospel,” for its very bold promise that God wants you to prosper. I never considered myself a follower of the prosperity gospel. I was simply an observer.

And then Bowler describes how being diagnosed with cancer helped her see “how deeply invested [she] was in [her] own Horatio Alger theology.”

If you live in this culture...it is extremely difficult to avoid falling into the trap of believing that virtue and success go hand in hand. The more I stared down my diagnosis, the more I recognized that I had my own quiet version of the idea that good things happen to good people...

It was a mindset that served me well until it didn't, until I was confronted with something I couldn't manage my way out of...

That was the most difficult moment to accept: the phone call, the walk to the hospital, when I realized that my own personal prosperity gospel had failed me. Anything I thought was good or special about me could not save me—my hard work, my personality, my humor, my perspective. I had to face the fact that my life is built with paper walls, and so is everyone else's.²

You know what I think Kate Bowler did?

She repented.

She returned—

NOT to a god of her making—

ie, good things happen to good people—

but to the God who made her.

Maybe that's the first thing WE need to repent of at this time of year.

Our desire to create our own gospel.

A gospel that comforts us without ever challenging us.

A gospel that blesses our desire to control our life,
without ever asking that we CHANGE our life.

After all, why should we change if we also believe that good things happen to good people?

Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon [KAY-pun] once remarked:

² Found at [Kate Bowler: "Everything happens for a reason" -- and other lies I've loved | TED Talk](#).

“Grace cannot prevail until our lifelong certainty that someone is keeping score has run out of steam and collapsed.”

Capon, you see, had come by his knowledge of God’s grace the hard way. He describes what happened in his life when he “committed the... sin of infidelity.”

He says that he “made the monumentally stupid mistake of...[believing] that I could repent so persuasively that she’d have to forgive me.”

“But it didn’t [happen]...

My first reaction, of course, was denial...

[and] my second reaction was anger: She had to forgive me!”

“At that time, that was...my idea of repentance:

a negotiation in which I was certain that my sincerity
would give me the upper hand....

and get my life back where it belonged,

with me in the driver’s seat.

“Then it slowly began to dawn on me that my control wasn’t going to come back...”³

It’s another false gospel we all love to live by:

That our lives are ours to control.

I call it the Homer Simpson way of approaching the Christian faith.

³ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching: Proclaiming the Gospel Against the Wisdom of the World*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, as quoted by William H. Willimon in *Thank God It’s Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.

You see, there was episode of *The Simpsons* years ago where Homer dreams that he has died and finds himself before the Pearly Gates.

But as he's about to enter, St. Peter stops him and says he hasn't earned enough points to be admitted to heaven. He'll have to go back to earth and do one more good deed.

So Homer's spirit is sent back to Springfield, where he finds himself in the bedroom he shares with Marge.

"I have to do one good deed so I can enter Heaven," he tells his wife. "Tell me what to do."

"Well," says Marge, "there are lots of chores that need doing—
wash the dishes,
mow the lawn,
feed the dog..."

"Geez," Homer fumes, "I just want to enter Heaven, I'm not running for Jesus!"⁴

Well—you and I may not be running for Jesus either.
But today, John is asking us to get in the same line as Jesus.
It's the repentance line, the forgiveness line, the new life line.

You see, they were all lined up to receive John's baptism long ago.
Teachers, woodworkers.
Pharisees, tax collectors, soldiers.
Even Jesus.

⁴ This story has appeared in many places. I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for the original reference.

Even Jesus was in line to receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

What do you think about that line?

Would you get in that line to repent, to turn around, to start anew?

Would you get in that line if Alexi McCammond was in it?

Would you get in that line if Jon Gruden was in it?

The late preacher David Bartlett, who was academic Dean at Yale Divinity School for many years, once described a church that he and his wife belonged to in Oakland, California.

“...there were a number of Advent customs that we learned to love” at that church, Bartlett said. One of the customs was this:

On the last Sunday of Advent, with Christmas right around the corner, two members of the choir would always sing a Carol called, “What Shall I Bring to the Babe in the Manger?”

It was a way to encourage the congregation to think about a gift that they could offer that Christmas—some act of love, some sign of hope.

Bartlett says it was a nice tradition, but he goes on to point out that Advent/Christmas is not just the season of gift-giving. We’re also in the season for giving something up.

The season for letting go.⁵

⁵ From a collection of sermons by David Bartlett, *To All God’s Beloved in New Haven*, edited by Ian Doescher, Xlibris Corporation, 2003.

What would happen if we did that this Advent?

What would happen if we made this Advent the season of giving something up, of letting something go?

Of letting go of whatever gospel we prefer to follow in our lives instead of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

You see, John wasn't just a fire and brimstone, you brood of vipers kind of preacher. He was a NEW LIFE preacher. He told everyone to repent, because he believed that anyone—absolutely ANYONE—could have new life and new hope with God...

Have you thought about what you need to give up this Advent?

*How about your disappointment—
in someone you love, or in yourself?*

How about the old grudge that gets in your way whenever you see a particular member of your extended family?

How about the anger that's right below the surface; or the impatience that always makes its way above the surface??

What would happen if you wrote what you wanted to give up and repent of this Advent on, I don't know...the offering envelope in your pew.

I was thinking we could make our own line.
I was thinking that we could make it just like Commitment Sunday.

You could write whatever it is that you need to give up, or change, or repent of on an envelope or something...and then bring that piece of paper forward and lay it up front on the steps of the chancel.

(I even brought a basket with me...for you to put that paper in.)

We could make it a new tradition right here at Westminster, where all of us every Advent could bring something forward, a written commitment to repent and return to the new life that God is so eager to give you.

Ah, I can see the confusion and slight panic on your faces. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask that you walk up front this morning.

You don't have to perform a physical act of repentance in here. What about out there?

Are you willing to stand in John's line...out there?

You see, the curious thing about John's sermon is that we don't know how he ended it.

“So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

That's what Luke writes, and maybe that's the point. Maybe John preaches the same sermon every year, and we don't know how it's going to end until we return to our car, and return to our home, and return to our God...

Maybe that's the point.
I think the ending of John's sermon—
is up to me and to you.

Amen.