

A few weeks ago, a couple of members of Trinity, brought a trailer to church and put winter evergreens into our flower pots. They then drove by our house and asked if we would like some in our flower pots. My wife said, "Sure!". A change in seasons. No more flowers growing in flowerpots, but evergreens to remind us that snowy winter is on its way. Yes, it's December, and time to prepare again for Christmas. At the mall, and in our neighborhood, you'll see all kinds of evidence – wreaths, trees, garland, lights, ornaments, fake snow – Christmas decorations everywhere. I'm sure many of you have taken some time to decorate your homes. Of all the decorations, which one is the most important decoration of them all? Most people would say the tree, right? For many, that's the Christmas tree is the most important decoration of them all. Maybe for others, it's something else. There is another decoration I want to talk to you about. From God's perspective, it is THE most important decoration of them all. Do you know what it is? I'll give you some hints – first of all, it's invisible. Second of all, it's visible. And finally, it's a decoration that God wants you to leave up all year round. What is it?

Imagine going to the mall, and standing in line so that your child can get his or her picture taken with Santa Claus. But when you get to the front of the line, you don't see a big man with a red suit and a white beard. You see a scrawny man with a leathery face – a long, messy, Middle-Eastern beard. He's wearing some type of brown animal skin – later you find out that it's camel's hair. He's eating grasshoppers and honey. Meet John the Baptist, labeled by Jesus as the greatest of all the prophets. This morning, we're going to look at his life, listen to his message, and learn about the most important decoration of them all that God wants each one of us to have.

Matthew chapter 3 tells us that John was living in the desert of Judea, out by the Jordan River. His message was very simple: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Jesus, the Messiah, was coming. The Savior of the nations would soon take away the sins of the world. Soon, he would send his apostles and disciples into the world to share the Gospel with others. And soon, he would come again on Judgment Day. All that and more is the kingdom of heaven, and it's near, John says. It's time to repent.

There's an interesting illustration for repentance here. Matthew tells us that John the Baptist "was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah said that John the Baptist was coming. Look at the illustration for repentance: "make straight paths for him." Make straight paths in your heart, and in your life. Repentance is radical road construction which takes place inside of you. Our thoughts, our desires, our wants, our feelings – all these things tend to be crooked inside of us. Spiritual potholes everywhere in our soul! Our love for God - unpleasantly up and down. "Repent," John tells us, "Make straight paths for him." In Old Testament times, before a king would visit a town, radical road construction would take place. If the road had high spots, they would be chopped them down. If the road had low spots, they would be filled in. If the road was crooked, it would be straightened out. Once the road was smooth and straight, it was ready for the king. Do this inside of you, John tells the people. Your thoughts, your desires, your wants, your feelings, your love for God – straighten it out.

Of all the Christmas decorations, this one is the most important one of them all – an attitude of repentance. It's invisible because it's a change that takes place inside of you, a big change. That's what John was illustrating with his lifestyle. He didn't wear Tommy Hillfiger, he wore camel's hair - the same clothes that the poor of the day would wear. His leather belt was considered as something cheap. His grasshopper and honey diet was the diet of the poor and underprivileged. He lived in the open desert, instead of in a nice condo. Do you see the point John was making with his life? "What I'm doing on the outside, I want you to do on the inside –

get rid of your love for things, your materialism. Get rid of your pride. Be someone who is humble, someone who is focused on spiritual things, someone who is focused on worshiping God and serving others.”

John uses strong language in our text for today. The Pharisees and the Sadducees had arrived. They were very pious outwardly, but inwardly, they were proud and materialistic. John calls them a brood of vipers, and tells them to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The Pharisees and Sadducees claimed to be humble and spiritual, but everything they said and did showed them to be proud and materialistic. They thought that their relation to Abraham, their bloodline was all that was needed to secure being in good favor with God. This reminds me of the television show M\*A\*S\*H, Dr. Charles Emerson Winchester III made it clear what separated him from everybody else. "I'm a Winchester," he was heard to say more than once. For him, it was his family name that made him superior to everyone else. John compares these religious leaders to a fruit tree, and tells them that the “ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” He condemns the Pharisees and Sadducees, because they would not change. They would not repent. They would say and do things to make themselves look pious and spiritual. But there was no real change in their hearts and lives. They were proud and materialistic and liked it that way..

We struggle with this too. It's easy to act humble and spiritual. It's easy to show up in church and smile and shake a hand and talk about the real meaning of Christmas. It's easy to frown when people talk about pride and materialism. But let me ask you this – what kind of religion are you really looking for? Most people are looking for a religion that makes them feel good about themselves. “Oh, I love that TV show,” people say about whatever pseudo-Christian TV show that they are watching. “It makes me feel so good.” Is that what you are looking for? Something that makes you feel good about yourself?

That's not what Christianity, or John the Baptist, are all about. John the Baptist isn't standing out in the desert telling everyone to smile, because God loves you just the way you are. And then everyone leaves the desert and goes home and feels good about themselves. John the Baptist is telling you to change – to stop being yourself – to repent – to be different from how you normally are. But we don't like that. We are the Pharisees and Sadducees that John condemns in the desert, people who act pious and religious, but deep down inside, we like being proud and materialistic, and that's how we will continue to be. John condemns us in these verses and warns us that the fire of God's wrath is coming our way.

But we can repent – we can do what those people did in verse 8 – “confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” Those people confessed their pride, their materialism.

Do you ever hear people say, “I'm sorry” today? It's very rare. I've noticed that when celebrities get into trouble, many of them make it sound like they're apologizing, but they're not really. Have you ever noticed that? What do they say? “If I have offended you, I'm sorry. If I have caused you trouble, if I have inconvenienced you, I'm sorry.” What's missing from that? Admitting guilt! “I really haven't done anything wrong, but I'm sorry if I upset you.” There's no admission of guilt there – it's a fake apology! In our culture, that's what passes for an apology today – don't admit your wrong – just express remorse that someone else feels bad.

That's not what God is looking for from you. The first part of repentance is admitting to God your guilt. “God, I am selfish. God, I am greedy. God, I am worldly. God, I am impatient and sometimes angry. God, I am an unloving gossip. God, I have been ignoring you and make excuses for it. God, I am sinful. I am sorry, and I confess all of my sin to you.” If you want to get

ready for Christ, if you want to do some soul construction, that's step number one – confess your sin.

Then comes the second part of repentance, receiving the wonderful forgiveness that God provides. God forgives us because of the one that would come after John. “After me, will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry.” He was powerful, and yet, was humble, not obsessed with material things, but spiritual. This one who coming produced more fruit than any other person that ever lived. He allowed himself to be cut down and thrown into the fire, even though he had done nothing wrong. This man was Jesus Christ, a human being, but also the very Son of God, God himself. He lived perfectly, for you. And was cut down and thrown into the fire, crucified on the cross, to take away all our sins. He was raised from the dead, and just as John baptized people for the forgiveness of sins, so also Jesus has baptized you. Perhaps it was through a pastor, or someone else, but when that happened, it really was Jesus baptizing you, forgiving you, washing all your sins away.

When you walk out of here today, you walk out of here with the same comfort those people felt who were baptized by John in the desert. They walked away knowing that their sins were forgiven. They walked away empowered to make real changes in their lives, changes that glorified God. You have the exact same comfort those people had – perhaps even more, because you know how Jesus has taken your sins away. And like those people you have been given strength to make real changes in your life – to straighten out what's in your heart, and to show it in your life.

Not too many years ago newspapers carried the story of Al Johnson, a Kansas man who repented, who came to faith in Jesus Christ. What made his story so remarkable was not his conversion, but the fact that as a result of his newfound faith in Christ, he confessed to a bank robbery he had participated in when he was nineteen years old. Because the statute of limitations on the case had run out, Johnson could not be prosecuted for the offense. But because of his complete and total change of heart, he not only confessed his crime, he voluntarily repaid his share of the stolen money! That's repentance – radical reconstruction of the heart. That's what John meant when he said, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” If you are truly sorry, and if you recognize you have been forgiven by Christ, we'll see a change in your life.

Of all the decorations you have, this one is the most important of them all. It's invisible, because it first takes place in your heart the Holy Spirit changes you through the Word, and through baptism. It's visible, because you become empowered to show your repentance in your life – just like that former bank robber.. And unlike our other Christmas decorations, repentance is something that you and I will leave up all year round.

We pray, O Lord, give me the heart of John the Baptist, a heart of repentance, a heart that is humble and spiritual, a heart that is prepared to welcome you, and shows it, by the way I live my life. Amen.