

Pastor Colleen's Sermon of December 13, 2009

Grace, Peace and Mercy be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Opportunity comes with so many different faces and looks that we don't often recognize it when it crosses our path.

For example, recently I was speaking with someone who was recovering from the flu. I was asking them how they were doing and they said that having the flu was lousy but it had forced them to take time off from work and to just concentrate on taking care of themselves. Having the flu was bad but having to slow down and just focus on themselves was an opportunity they wouldn't have had without being sick.

Next, I was listening to a conversation between two women who were behind me on line at a store and one was telling the other about how having her husband's sister move into the house across the street had turned out to be a godsend. She said she thought it was going to be a lot of extra stress having the families living so close but it has turned out that they have all grown closer and they are all getting to know one another better. Apparently at first glance this new move looked like it was going to cost this woman patience and hardship but it had instead become an opportunity for the two families to grow closer together.

So often what we predict will just be hardship and tough times turns out to be opportunity in hiding.

And so often divine opportunity...
Or opportunity that is sent by God never looks like we think it will.
So it's no wonder we don't recognize it;
or even if we do recognize it we often first resist it.

The first Advent preacher, John the Baptist,
offered opportunity in a compelling, almost ferocious way.
But when you first hear his words, you don't think he's offering opportunity;

John the Baptist cried out, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
With the word repent, John was telling the people that they need not remain as they were.
He is telling them how they are not held captive to their failures,
their past, or their inadequacy.
They can repent.
John is offering them opportunity dressed in rough clothing
And he is offering us the same opportunity as well.

Into the Advent season of our lives... into this time of waiting...
John is reminding us all that we too can get rid of the past.
We can start over.
If we are on the wrong track, we can turn around, or get on another train.

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We may not be able to change what we've already done,
and we may not be able to fully escape the consequences of those past choices.
But we need not continue in the same destructive path.
We can repent, and start again.
Maybe that's why people were drawn to John.
They felt hope when they heard him preach.
He spoke harsh, incisive words, but he led them to a door of hope.
"You can repent," he said. "There is a way out of the dilemma you're in."

At first glance repentance may not seem like opportunity but in the larger scheme of what we are waiting for in the Advent season it makes sense.
We are waiting for the birth of our Savior...
We are waiting for the ultimate gift...
John shouted out to us all last Sunday we need to prepare and whether we realize it or not repenting is a way of preparation.
As we repent, we sweep out the accumulated,
burdensome trash of our lives and clear the way for God's love to fill us.

Right now we are in the best season for repenting.
How better can we prepare for the celebration of Jesus' coming than by clearing away the guilt and pain of the past to make clear a highway for our God?
How better to prepare for the incarnation of God than by letting go of the things that keep us from God?
How better to celebrate the birth of hope than by turning our lives around and embracing this free and unearned gift?

In the movie, "how the Grinch stole Christmas" after the Grinch has stolen all of the gifts, decorations and trappings of the Christmas Holiday...
After he has realized that he could not steal Christmas from the Whoos in Whooville
After his heart grows three sizes he races back down the mountain with all that he's stolen and he stands in front of the people of Whooville and he says...
I did it... I took it all... and I am sorry.
And the Whoos forgive him and he becomes part of the community once again and he joins in a huge celebration.
The Grinch repents... he clears away all the pain and hate in his heart and he is then opened up to the love and forgiveness of the entire community.
He grasps the opportunity for repentance and his life is changed forever.

What is it in your own life that needs to be cleared away?
What direction are you heading that needs a course alteration?
Where in your own life do you need to start over again?

Today, John is offering us all a wonderful opportunity.
And be clear...
Whether or not we choose to repent
Whether or not we choose to grasp this opportunity

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Whether or not we choose to act...

“one is coming whom we are not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal

One is coming who will baptize with not just ordinary water but with the holy spirit and fire”

Regardless of whether or not we choose to take up John's invitation to repent

Hope and light are about to be born into the world.

The Savior of the world is coming...

Whether we act or not.

The opportunity here is to be as prepared as possible for this new birth.

Do we want to just stand on the sidelines and witness this birth

Or do we want to experience and feel this fire deep within our hearts

Do we want to turn toward this light and feel it soak into our very souls?

The prophet Zephaniah sings to us this day that God is in our midst and will rejoice over us with gladness.

The Lord will save the lame and gather the outcast

The Lord will bring us home.

This is our season of opportunity.

We can repent at any and every hour,
but here we are at the best of all hours.

Now is the time,

here is the place,

and opportunity knocks.

Repent, the voice invites us,

and begin fresh and new.

Thanks be to God for such an opportunity.

Amen

May the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen