

Some of you will remember Terry Anderson. He was the journalist who was held as a hostage in Lebanon for 2,454 days! Terry had been raised Catholic though he had not been practicing for years. During his captivity a Bible was given to him. He read it. He pondered his life. He had lots of time to ponder his life. He had made a lot of mistakes. He wasn't sure that people liked him much. He wasn't sure he liked himself very much. Later in the first year of his captivity Anderson became aware of the fact that other hostages were living next door. One was a priest. Father Lawrence Jenco. He asked his captors if he could see the priest. "*I am a Catholic,*" he told them. "*I want to make a confession.*"

His wish was granted. Father Jenco came to his room. They both took off their blindfolds. Anderson hardly knew where to begin. It had been 25 years since he had last made confession. Father Jenco was encouraging. Anderson began reciting to this priest the sins he had been reflecting upon: A bad marriage; Chasing women; Drinking. Anderson found it a very emotional experience. When he finished both he and Father Jenco were in tears. Father Jenco then laid his right hand upon Anderson's head and proclaimed him forgiven. This moment of confession was his first formal step back into the church. Self-reflection had grown within him out of the darkness of his hostage encounter. It was time to face the light. It was time in his life for a turn around.

The First Sunday in Advent began with apocalyptic images of the last days that, in the popular imagination, are as non-Christmasy as can be imagined.

Now Second Sunday of Advent confronts us with John the Baptist, whom the church has also long insisted is an absolutely necessary character in the Advent drama. But honestly most Christians don't want John at Christmas. We don't put John on Christmas cards. We have no John the Baptist Christmas tree ornaments. John is too untidy, too dangerous for Christmas. Invite John to your holiday party and he'll spill eggnog all over your rug as he flails his arms around talking about the need to repent.

Repentance is a difficult word to tie to Christmas. After all, Christmas is a warm and fuzzy holy day. At Christmastime we think of God like a jolly old Santa Claus who forgives all and accepts all and would never hold us responsible for how we live our lives. The last thing we want to think about at Christmas is repentance.

But Advent says it should be the first thing we consider. We're preparing our homes for Christmas, but not our hearts. We're hanging up lights, but ignoring the darkness in our own lives--the darkness of strained relationships, the darkness of moral weakness, the darkness of anger, hopelessness and fear.

We all have heard that repentance means to turn your life around. But first you have figure out which direction you should be going. Figure out what really matters. There's a tombstone in Wisconsin that leaves no doubt about the priority of the person who lies in that particular grave. Under the man's name and the dates of his birth and death is carved this inscription: "Bowled 300 in 1982." A woman was taking her time browsing through a yard sale. She said to the homeowner,

“My husband is going to be very angry when he finds out I stopped at your yard sale.” The homeowner sought to reassure her: “I’m sure he’ll understand when you tell him about all the bargains you found,” she replied. “Normally, yes,” the woman said. “But he just broke his leg, and he’s waiting for me to take him to the emergency room to have it set.”

Everyone has his or her own concept of what is important in life. It’s easy for us as followers of Jesus to take our eyes off the target, to forget what’s really important. There are so many priorities, particularly during the holiday season.

John the Baptist, however, was convinced that he had one important thing to do in his life and that was to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus. That is also our task--to prepare the world for Christ. It is easy for us to forget that sometimes. The season of Advent belongs, not to baby Jesus, but to old weird John, munching on grasshoppers, dressed in his camel’s hair shirt. As much as we might want to jump the gun and start our Christmas celebration the day after Thanksgiving, its Advent and Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of Christ.

As much as we want to resist the call for quiet self-examination, we need to do exactly that. You know what John’s Advent sermon is, don’t you? **"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."** That’s it. No cute stories, no poems, no jokes. He just stands there, roaring his one-line sermon like a lion. You could hear "REPENT!" echoing off the barren desert landscape. And we don’t want to hear that, especially now, at this time of the year.

Don't you just want to shout at him, "Lighten up, John! You crusty old party pooper! It's Christmas, for Pete's sake! Can't you see we're trying to have fun here?"

But, you see, John is a prophet. What's hard to take about prophets isn't predictions about the future, it is what they say about the PRESENT. And what they say about the present is almost always, "**You've got it all wrong! You'd better repent!**" Don't know quite how to do that? Try some of these suggestions:

- Make friends with someone you're at odds with.
- Pick up the phone and talk to somebody you haven't talked to in months or years.
- Be the first to hold out the hand of reconciliation even though it gets slapped or rejected.
- Don't turn your head at shady dealings. Be willing to put some of your possessions on the line.
- Add up your Christmas spending bills that you chalked up for presents and then slice off 10 percent and give it to the poor. Give evidence that you mean to repent.

Repentance doesn't mean we devote all our time to changing our lives – most of our lives aren't that bad. It is more a matter of quality than of quantity. The ideal is that we should never be totally unmindful of the reality and the presence of God in our lives. In time of explicit prayer, God is at center stage, as it were, while at other times he moves into the wings but never far from full consciousness on our part.

A father once told about playing with his young son one afternoon. They tussled playfully on their front lawn when dad accidentally hit the young boy in the face with his elbow. It was a sharp blow. The little boy was stunned by the impact. It hurt and he was just about to burst into tears. But then he looked into his father's eyes. Instead of anger and hostility, he saw there his father's sympathy and concern; he saw there his father's love and compassion. Instead of exploding into tears, the little boy suddenly burst into laughter. What he saw in his father's eyes made all the difference!

The sharp blow of God's message to us is the call to Repentance. But also look into your father's eyes. What he offers you is forgiveness and that makes all the difference. Repent and you will be forgiven.