



**ALL SAINTS CHURCH**  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**A Festival Of Forgiveness On The Way To Christmas**  
A sermon preached by the Rev. George F. Regas  
December 6, 2009

Every preacher needs a theme. And some times preachers get glued to one theme and you hear it Sunday after Sunday. Not here at All Saints!

John the Baptist, our Advent preacher, had a theme; it was repentance. His first sermon when the word of God came to him in the wilderness was to proclaim “repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Luke 3:2-6)

John the Baptist was something of a “Johnny-One-Note” and the recurring note was “repent”. His first sermon was on repentance and his last message before King Herod had him beheaded to please one of his dancing ladies was, “Repent for the Kingdom of God is about to break into your lives.”

What do you think about repentance and forgiveness?

Garrison Keillor tells a story in his book, Leaving Home, that is both hilarious and poignant. It concerns folks coming home to Lake Wobegon at Christmas. “All these folks who have grown up and moved away,” Keillor writes, “become all smart and sophisticated; they think they’ve outgrown Lake Wobegon, but at Christmas they make their way reluctantly back home.” Then Keillor describes Larry Sorenson coming back to his Lutheran Church at Christmas.

“Larry, the Sad Boy, was there, who was saved twelve times in the Lutheran Church, an all-time record. He threw himself weeping and contrite on God’s throne of grace on twelve separate occasions – and this in a Lutheran church that wasn’t even evangelical, had no altar call, no organist playing ‘Just as I am without one plea’ while the choir hummed and a guy with shiny hair took hold of your heartstrings and played you like a cheap guitar. This is the Lutheran Church, not a bunch of hillbillies. These are Scandinavians, and they repent in the same way they sin: discreetly, tastefully, at the proper time. Larry Sorenson came forward weeping buckets and crumbled up at the communion rail to the amazement of the minister, who had delivered a dry sermon about stewardship. Twelve times. Even we fundamentalists got tired of him. God didn’t mean for us to feel guilt all our lives.” (Leaving Home, pp. 181-182)

I am not suggesting you come weeping to the communion rail, but I do want you to hear John the Baptist calling for repentance, forgiveness and a new world.

Advent puts us on the road to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus, and if we are to experience Christmas with all its glory and wonder – we need to probe with John the Baptist the meaning of repentance, forgiveness and a new world.

## I

First, repentance means sorrow and regret.

As I look out over the broken and anguished human situation, my conscience cannot be clean. If it is clean, it is simply because I do not use it. If our consciences are not scared by what is happening in Malawi and the Congo, in Pasadena and South Central LA – then we've gone to sleep on life.

One day a woman stood in the midst of a group of starving children in Somalia, their bodies ravaged with starvation, their fearful eyes bulging from their listless faces. She wanted to scream out at God until she realized God was screaming at her and her world to be helping, healing hands.

You and I have seen so many people in dire need along the Jericho Roads of our world – those beaten with oppression and prejudice, the poor, the hungry, the lonely and friendless, those who stink with the dirt of the streets, those desperate ones who have no work, no money, no hope, those with bodies riddled with disease, and also those broken and maimed as the casualties of war.

They thirst for the cool waters of decency, dignity, and a chance at life.

In so many ways, I know I've failed to reach out adequately.

At one level, the challenge of Advent is to see this and know that by what you and I have done and left undone, we have added to the storehouse of indecency and indignity in the world, and hurt God's people and broken God's heart.

Repentance is that grief, sorrow and regret which fill our hearts.

Most of us have a tug of conscience, a reminder of the distance that separates our ideals and our behavior. Some of us have hurt even those we love the most; we've betrayed our trust, failed to be what we promised to be. Oh sisters and brothers of the world, and those I love the most, I repent. That puts us on the road to Christmas.

“Repent!” shouts John the Baptist. He sounds harsh but that call to repentance is based on respect, not on threat. It is as if a friend were to take you by the shoulders and shake you because she believes in you more than you believe in yourself.

William Sullivan says it best: “There is in repentance this beautiful mystery – that we fly home fastest on a broken wing.”

## II

Now, look at forgiveness:

Forgiveness means we can come home to love, acceptance and restoration.

That is the message of Bethlehem, and the birth of the one whom we call Savior.

Ernest Hemingway began one of his memorable short stories entitled “The Captain of the World” with these lines:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement. (*The Complete Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p. 27)

The joke is about the universality of the name “Paco” in Spain. But it works only because of the underlying longing of so many to be forgiven, whether they are sons or daughters, mothers or fathers, friends, colleagues or lovers.

All may be forgiven; that is a central message of the one born in the stable in Bethlehem.

We desire forgiveness because we value so profoundly our relationships, and most of us know that broken relationships cannot be mended and restored without forgiveness.

In essence, forgiveness means the restoration of a relationship. Haven’t you experienced that?

The scars and hurts and consequences of your disloyalties may still be in my heart; yet forgiveness means, at the very bottom, a simple sort of miracle. It is my desire to start over again with you; it is my desire to try again with the person who caused me pain. It is a welcome back into my heart. That is the challenge of the one born in a stable whose birth the angels announce.

That’s what God does in forgiveness: offers us a new start with the divine Creator.

Many of us have done things we hope to God no one ever knows about – yet God says, “come to the mercy seat of forgiveness.”

No matter what it is that we’ve done, God holds out a hand and says, “Come on, take it. I want to be your friend again. In spite of everything, I want to be around you and in you. I want to be a presence in you, the power of your life ...

“I’m not going to let anything you did get in my way. So let’s begin again.”

That’s what God does in forgiveness. And it is exactly what we do with each other. “I want to be your friend again. I want to be your father again ... your daughter again ... your lover again. Let’s start over.”

That's the festival of forgiveness which I see in the promises of Christmas. The past with all its pain is there. We can't change it. As Thomas Aquinas said 700 years ago, "Even God Almighty cannot make the past not to have been." Forgiveness doesn't obliterate the past, but puts us in a new relationship with it. Forgiveness means the past is not held against the future; the future is open and we are free to give it a new shape, a new meaning.

### III

Move on with me to a third consideration.

John the Baptist had this strange and compelling power to help people believe a new world is possible.

He spoke to the hearts of people with words that penetrated deeper than just the ear and mind ... to those places of the heart where people feel, deliberate and act.

Listen to his words in today's Gospel reading: "Make ready the way of our God; clear a straight path. Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be leveled. The twisted paths will be made straight, and the rough road smooth – and all humankind will see the salvation of God." (Luke 3:5-6)

John the Baptist puts people on the tiptoe of expectation ... to believe a new world is possible.

And when you and I envision it, desire it and aspire to it with eagerness, expectancy and work, we prepare the way of the Lord.

I live in the expectancy that a new world is possible:

- an abolition of all the deadly nuclear weapons and the end of wars forever in spite of President Obama's unwise and immoral expansion of the Afghanistan conflict;
- the control of greed and the equitable distribution of the resources of God's creation and fullest utilization of humanity's creative ingenuity, so that finally there is no hunger on this planet;
- and the noble conquest of all those prejudices that blight human life – racial, sexual, political and religious – the brutalizing sin of prejudice gone forever.

This great expectancy that God can do something tremendous through us is the doorway through which energy comes to us for converting these dreams into reality; the expectation that God can do something tremendous through us.

Mary Regas and I were among the 100,000 in the Rose Bowl recently for the U2 World Tour Concert. What a remarkable night. We were the oldest people there, on Row 60, the closest to heaven. We loved it.

Bono is my favorite rock star. Toward the end of the U2 Rose Bowl concert, all of a sudden on the huge screens that allow the vast crowd to participate intimately in all the performances, appears a video of Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaking. "We are all brothers and sisters. We are one human family, we are one, we are one, we are one". Bono then begins his popular mesmerizing song "One":

A few lines of those lyrics:

You say love is a temple, love a higher law  
Love is a temple, love the higher law.  
You ask me to enter, but then you make me crawl  
And I can't be holding on to what you got,  
When all you got is hurt.

One love, one blood, one life, you got to do what you should.  
One life with each other: sisters, brothers.  
One life, but we're not the same.  
We get to carry each other, carry each other.  
One, one.

Yes, Advent is saying, God can create a new world of unity through us.



This is Advent – prepare for a God who is still creating a new world through you; a God of mercy who never gives up on any of us.

Be part of the festival of forgiveness as you make your way to Christmas. It will change your life forever.

Amen.