

Joel 2:11-19 – Advent 3 Wednesday– Advent: Return – December 17, 2025

+In Nomine Iesu+

What is your house like at Christmas? And I don't just mean—do you decorate? Instead, what is the tone—the atmosphere—the climate? *And* I don't just mean—at what temperature is your thermostat set? The right answer is 64 degrees in the winter, by the way. 74 in the summer. Instead, what do people feel and experience as your family gathers?

There can be problems. Families fight and argue. We are selfish and discontented. We make others walk on eggshells around us. Cut that out—even fight against it. I want us to walk in the ways of Christ this Christmas. And that means two things. First, we proclaim Christmas. And second, we walk in the same kind of humility that Jesus displayed—setting aside His rightful place and glory.

We decorate in ways that point people to Christ—Advent candles, a Nativity, light, angels, the symbols of the faith—like we have on our tree here. But let's decorate our lives and attitudes as well. Determine right now to be God's servant to your family. And even more, we are servants of Christ this Christmas.

This might include a prayer with real substance before the family meal. It might include a reading of the Nativity from Matthew 1 or Luke 2. We come to the Divine Service on Christmas Day. But it also includes giving ourselves away for the good of others. Let's return to the Lord our God—in our Christmas celebrations—and in our families. And let it begin with you.

I have always liked the first two verses of Romans 12. These were our theme verses this last year. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

But listen to how Paul continues. This is the very next verse. "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." And then, skipping down to verse 10, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves."

And I want us to think about this attitude or disposition as repentance. We return to the Lord by seeing the grace He has poured out upon us. And we return to the Lord by walking in the ways of self-sacrifice. We shape our lives by His desires. We recognize that Jesus came as a Servant—not to fulfill His own self-interests. And we do the same. In humility, we count others more significant than ourselves. This is repentance at Christmas.

And so, we remember that we are celebrating the Incarnation and Nativity of Our Lord. And we do so in the same kind of humility that He displayed among us. It is as Jesus says in Matthew 20, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." That is the good news we proclaim in Advent—and around our Christmas trees.

With the beginning of Advent—and the new church year—we have embarked on our emphasis of Celebrating the Saints. We commemorate the church historic—the Prophets, Apostles, Church Fathers, Martyrs, and Reformers. This is our theme for the year. In Epiphany, we are going to memorize a verse together. More about that later.

But, on this day, the Church remembers the Prophet Daniel and his three young friends. In some Christian traditions, the commemoration of the saint for which you are named is more significant than your own birthday. So, today is my day. And it is your day too—if you are named Daniel—or Hananiah, Mishael, or Azariah—Daniel’s three friends. And there is something about Daniel worth imitating and remembering.

We have been looking at Advent disciplines over the last few weeks. And in this time of preparation and anticipation for the Nativity of Our Lord, we have found rest in a contemplative life. We have found grace in a receptive life. And now we return to the Lord our God. Perhaps we should call this repentance.

But I want to talk about repentance more thoroughly. Daniel is a good place to start. We know Daniel best for the Lions’ Den—for his faithfulness in exile in Babylon—and for the eschatological visions God gave him. But there is also this excellent prayer in Daniel that gives us a wonderful look at repentance—a repentance that is selfless and good for others.

Now, Daniel was a righteous man in his generation. Even though he gets twelve chapters in our Bible about his life, no sin is revealed. Of course, he was not perfect. We find that he confessed his sins to the Lord in Daniel 9. But he was faithful and steadfast—even in Babylon—a place where it was very difficult to be faithful and steadfast. The Babylonians even attempted to execute him for it. Although, they failed with him at the Lion’s Den. And they failed with Hanaiah, Mishael, and Azariah at the Fiery Furnace.

Daniel is from Jerusalem. And he knew what happened among God’s people there. They were so unfaithful to God. They were caught up in unimaginable idolatry and immorality. They were selfish. And that was what led to the exile. And even though Daniel was not guilty of such sin—he prayed to God about his own sin—as he tells us—but he also prayed for the whole people of God in exile—that God would forgive them—and restore them—according to His great promises.

You can find the whole prayer in chapter nine. But let me give you a taste of it. “O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land...O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name.”

Notice, that even in repentance, Daniel’s care extends beyond himself. He prays for God’s people. He prays regarding God’s promise. He seeks God’s intervention for the restoration of God’s covenant community. And so, the first thing we notice about repentance in Scripture is that it is prayer. He speaks out loud to God—regarding his own sins and the sins of his people. He confesses and repents by calling upon the Lord.

Sin and rebellion—among individuals—or among communities—doesn't just fade away with time. It is to be confessed. We speak it out loud—to the pastor—with the church—with one another. We must admit the ways in which we have swerved from the Word and will of God. We can't just hide it—putting on a good face on Sundays.

And we have a God that is so good to forgive. He has atoned for our sins in Jesus Christ. Remember that the incarnation always leads to the cross. And the cross always leads to the resurrection. He is numbered with sinners—so that sin no longer holds power over us. Jesus sets us free from selfishness. And so, we are dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ.

I like the way the Psalmist says it in Psalm 32, “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”

And maybe this is a challenge for us today. Have you prayed for the people that you are gathering with this Christmas? Have you prayed for the people in your family that you might not see? Have you recognized those family sins that come so easily to us? Repentance can be a corporate affair among God's people—and in our families. We can take such things to the Lord—and then we are set free in Jesus Christ.

The Prophet Joel—from our reading today—is also helpful. As Joel speaks of repentance, his emphasis is on the heart. He wants a true repentance—not just a formal one. Now, he does speak of outward expressions—fasting, weeping, mourning. But Joel is against is an outward expression that doesn't lead to both inner change and a renewed life.

He calls people to not merely rend their garments—an outward expression of repentance—but to truly return to the Lord in repentance—through a broken and contrite heart. God wants us to be heartbroken over our sin. And only that will actually turn us from sin—and enable us to find His favor again.

And so, the Prophet Joel invites us to be aware of where our hearts are especially preoccupied. We calls us to focus our attention and care against selfish passions. Repentance is a battle. So, we start first with the temptation or the sin that is attacking us at the present. We fight against the passion that troubles us the most. And if you don't know what that is, ask your family members. There is a good chance they know. Of course, you also have to be willing to hear their answers.

But it is important to remember, repentance is not *just* a feeling. It is not just feeling sorry for what we have done. We can't just lower our shoulders in defeat—apologize—and then pick up the same sins the next day. Repentance is measured as love is measured—not just by feelings—but also by deeds.

This is why John the Baptist preached the way he did when so many were coming to be baptized in the Jordan—especially to the Scribes and Pharisees that he didn't trust—and knew were hypocrites. We heard this passage a couple of Sundays ago. He said to them, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance...Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

John is shockingly direct. But that's good for them and for us. Repentance is being sorry for our sins. But is also being sorry enough to quit. Repentance, very literally, means a change of mind—a change so basic that the direction of our lives is altered. We were going one way—and now—by the grace of God—we are going another way.

Very often in life, we are focused on ourselves. And our hope lies in getting things our own way. And this means we are facing the wrong way. We are even facing away from Jesus.

And so, repentance means hearing God's Word. It means an awareness of those sins that so easily entangle us. It means being drawn into the sweet riches of grace as our sins are absolved. God has chosen to deal with us in mercy, when we confess our sins—when we turn away from selfishness—when we look to Christ in faith.

And He even works these things in our hearts. And the kind of repentance that He places in our hearts comes pouring out in lives of service and self-sacrifice. This is just the way God works. He produces contrite hearts—and changed lives. Repentance always leads to the rejection of sin—and to the embrace of godliness—in how we live. Repentance leads us to walk in the footsteps of Christ—in heart and life—with all humility and selflessness.

We have bounced around a little today. We have talked about Christmas celebrations—the Prophet Daniel—the Apostle Paul—the Prophet Joel—John the Baptist. But I hope you have found one theme throughout. We return to the Lord our God—as we prepare for Christmas.

The Prophets and Apostles call us to turn from ourselves—to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. He is gracious and merciful. He is slow to anger. He abounds in steadfast love. He relents over disaster. We see all of this in Jesus Christ. It is His proper work. And who knows? Perhaps He will leave a blessing behind—as Joel suggests.

There are only three regular Wednesday nights in the Advent season this year. Christmas Eve falls on Wednesday. And so, I will finish this sermon series at our Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. This is a wonderful service. I added one extra hymn this year, so we can sing a little more. Remember it is at 11:00 pm. Our Advent disciplines are to rest, receive, return—and finally, repeat. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+