

## THE VERBS OF ADVENT

### 2) Turn

#### Matthew 3: 1-12

**Rev. Ron Dunn**

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It was a race for the ages, one that would generate international interest and comment in a time before instant communication. The year was 1908 and the setting for this memorable race was the 1908 Olympic Games that were held, that year, in London. The race itself was the Marathon, the 26 mile race that remains the most grueling of any of the track and field events.

July 24, 1908 was a notably hot day in England—adding, of course, to the challenge of this already challenging race. Among the 56 competitors entered in the race, it was the Italian runner, Dorando Pietri, who manage to bide his time in the pack of runners until he saw and then seized the opportunity to take the lead at the 39 km (or 24 mile) mark. But the euphoria of taking the lead was not to last.

With but a short distance to go, he began to feel the effects of extreme fatigue and dehydration. By the time he manage to enter the stadium for the final lap around the track, Pietri was in trouble.

Dazed and disoriented, he took the wrong turn and headed around the track in the opposite direction that he was supposed to run. The race officials began to scream at him: **“Turn around! You’re heading in the wrong direction!”**

When Pietri pitched forward and fell, they picked him up and tried to point him in the right direction. Four more times Pietri would collapse and each time, the officials helped to his feet. As you can imagine, the crowd of 75,000 people was stunned by the unfolding drama.

Pietri finally managed to be the first to cross the finish line, but only after taking ten agonizing minutes to run and stumble over the last 350 metres. The second place runner, Johnny Hayes of the United States was informed of what had taken place and the American team quickly lodged a complaint against Pietri for the fact that he had received help from the race officials. The complaint was accepted and Pietri was disqualified from the race.

In the months and years to come, however, the memory of this epic race would live on. Pietri would continue on with his running career, but no longer as an obscure marathoner from Italy. Everywhere he went, interest and notoriety would follow. He would become known around the world for his ill-fated Olympic choice to take a wrong turn and race in the wrong direction.

In our lesson from Matthew’s Gospel, it is John the Baptist who takes it upon himself to shout his instructions to those who came out to hear his message: In true John the Baptist form, he shouted at his surprised listeners, **“Turn around! You’re heading in the wrong**

**direction!”** Now, admittedly, Matthew’s translation says it a bit differently: **“Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near!”** Yet, the meaning is essentially the same. By definition, to repent is to turn around. It is to turn away from sin and brokenness and turn toward righteousness and faith.

For that reason, the verb, “Turn” is the second of the four verbs that call us to action this Advent season. Last week, you may recall, we focused our attention on the verb, “Watch” and the importance of actively watching for the ways in which God is a work in our world. This morning, our focus shifts to the importance of turning away from that which may distract us or prevent us from experiencing the peace, the presence and the power of God. The witness and message of the Baptizer is one that calls for us to turn away from our sin and turn back toward God.

Now I am fully aware that words like “sin” and “repentance” are words that some would just as soon ignore or avoid all together. I realize that these words have, sometimes, been used in ways that were not helpful and that their meaning has often been distorted or manipulated in ways that were not helpful or healthy. I understand why some people refuse to use them as a part of their vocabulary.

But I also believe that they are words that have a pivotal role to play in the diagnosis of the human condition. They help to name and to frame the problem that confronts us as human beings—the problem of pride and arrogance that presumes that our direction is accurate and our bearings are correct.

In the time of John the Baptist, it was the religious authorities who were so confident in themselves and their own judgment that they could not, for the life of them, see or understand their need to turn around. They were so sure of the direction that they were heading, that they were stunned and even shocked by the Baptizer’s challenge to them.

**“You brood of vipers!”** he yelled, **“who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance! Don’t even think that you can ride on the coat tails of your ancestor, Abraham. You won’t get very far and you certainly won’t impress God!”**

Sometimes, you see, the pretense of religious faith can be used to us from the penetrating glimpse of God. We can stake our claim on our knowledge of the rituals and traditions, our familiarity with scripture and our identity as dues paying members of the community of faith. Yet, according to the Baptizer, that doesn’t really amount to a hill of beans.

What matters, says John, is that, first of all, you repent. You turn around from the self-centered direction you are heading and you turn back toward God and God’s way, the self-less way of Jesus. In other words, says John, you bear the “fruit worthy of repentance.”

Repentance, for all the “bad press” that it has received, is really a simple, two-step process. **It involves a turning away from and a turning toward.**

Both steps are absolutely needed and necessary. Repentance actually means very little if only the first step is taken. It is not enough to express sorrow or remorse for one’s actions

in the past unless there is a commitment to act differently in the future—unless there is the conscious choice to live the kind of life that tangibly reflects the change of heart that has taken place within.

We live, of course, in a culture that is so often consumed by its consuming, so often distracted by the choice to chase after the false gods that invite the wholesale pursuit of pleasure and profit without regard for the consequences. Although we would be the last to admit it, we are in danger of suffocating under the weight of the stuff that we accumulate and the possessions that we pile up. The irony, of course, is that the more we seem to acquire, the less we seem to be satisfied.

You don't have to listen too closely this morning to catch the drift of the Baptizer's message: Turn around! You're going in the wrong direction!! You can choose a new direction...God's direction...the direction that leads away from yourself and towards compassion and mercy and justice and love.

While I don't think that it is likely to happen, I believe that one of the healthiest things that we could do as a nation would be to participate in a national day of repentance...a day in which we recognize the places of our brokenness and division...a day in which we make our confession for the part that we have played in contributing to this brokenness and division...a day in which we then choose to act and live differently in order to heal the wounds and bridge the divide.

While this isn't likely to happen on a national scale, I believe that it can happen on a more localized scale. I believe that it can and should happen within the community of faith that we call the Church. Advent, you see, is a season that invites the kind of soul searching that is needed, the kind of personal reflection that leads, invariably, to social action. It is not enough to merely "watch" for the signs of God at work in our world. We must also turn—turn away from that which would separate us from God and turn toward those actions that unite us with God in the work that God is already doing.

In a few moments, we will share together in the feast of the Lord's table; that delicious celebration of the grace that God, in Christ, extends to each one of us. As you know, the invitation to this sacrament is one that recognizes the importance of repentance, of a turning away from sin and a turning back toward God.

At this time, I would simply like to offer to you the gift of silence and the opportunity to reflect upon the places in your life where you feel broken, the places in your life, where you feel out of rhythm, the places in your life where you feel out of sync with God, with others, and perhaps, even yourself.

I invite you, in the silence, to name those places of your brokenness and to ask God for the wisdom and the grace to live differently into your future, to "bear the fruit" that reflects your desire to share with God in the important work of bringing hope to the hopeless, love to the loveless and light to the darkness.

Far from being a negative thing, this can be a most positive thing—an essential first step in the process of creating and cultivating a better relationship with ourselves, with others and with our God. **Amen.**