

You will notice that the Gospel of Mark makes no mention of the birth of Christ. For him, “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” is John the Baptizer and his message. *John* is NOT the good news – he prepares us for the good news – the coming of Jesus Christ, sent to be the Messiah. John makes sure everyone is paying attention – in the tradition of the prophets – preparing the way, pointing in the direction of the One who is to come after him. John’s role is important – preparations are important – but not the main event.

John prepared the way by proclaiming a baptism – a purification or cleansing – of repentance for forgiveness of sins. *As great as our sin is, it cannot defeat the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.* In fact, the first thing we are told about the good news is that God forgives. So, we are getting ready, preparing to experience that forgiveness by repenting – turning away from our sin and toward God; removing the barriers caused by our sin that get in the way of our relationship with God, and with each other.

Jesus is coming and has come to assure us of the forgiveness of sin...and we don’t want to miss out on the joy and freedom that comes with it! So get ready, John says, pay attention to what’s important, repent, be baptized, prepare yourself for the love of God that forgives and redeems, offered to us in Jesus Christ.

John was obviously effective because Mark says, “And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” He got their attention, and they were

acting accordingly! It’s an amazing sign of the power of the Holy Spirit to move hearts when they hear and respond to the good news.

For example, back in the early years of the Ford Company, there was an employee who took a tool home every week. He did this for years! He never went to church, but finally his wife convinced him to go. While there, he was convicted in his sin, made a decision to confess and repent of that sin as he was baptized.

That Monday morning, he packed up all of the tools he had stolen and returned them to the plant. He told his supervisor what he had done, but he didn’t know what to do with the tools. So his supervisor went to his boss, told him about the stolen tools being returned, and asked what he should do, given that the worker had done the right thing, it didn’t seem appropriate to fire him! So this dilemma and question continued up the ladder, with no one knowing how to handle either the returned tools, or the worker who stole them.

Finally, they wired Henry Ford himself, who was in France at the time. It read:

“Employee stole tools. Was baptized. Returned tools. What should we do?”

Ford wired back: “Dam up the Detroit River and baptize the whole city!”

What POWER confession and repentance of sins, AND experiencing God’s forgiving grace can have on people’s lives!

There truly is a cleansing and freeing of our spirit when we lay ourselves bare before God and confess our sins. To do so is to acknowledge how we have fallen short of the glory of God, have rebelled against God, have allowed our emotions to control our

actions, instead of allowing God to direct our actions.

Confessing our sins is to seek God’s forgiveness, and God’s grace that helps us to turn away from those sins, those shortcomings, those things we say and do that disappoint God, those choices that are not of God’s will and ways.

Confession is the beginning of the journey toward repentance – the change that takes place in our actions and heart when we turn from our sin and toward God.

Repentance is also the way to remove the barriers caused by our disobedience, our pride, our distractions, our sins, our grudges, our trust in other gods, our skewed priorities or values that stand between us and God, and us and each other.

It is good and appropriate that we focus on our own sin and shortcomings when coming before the Lord. Because somehow it’s easy to get distracted by other people’s sin and shortcomings. Not only to notice them, but to keep track of them. To judge them. We may feel fully aware and truly penitent for our own sins, and yet sometimes we would rather stay focused on someone else’s, especially when they are hurtful to us.

As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “Staying angry with you is how I protect myself from you. Refusing to forgive you is not only how I punish you; it’s also how I keep you from getting close enough to hurt me again, and nine times out of ten it works, only there is a serious side effect. It is called bitterness, and it can do terrible things to the human body and soul.”

How true that is! How easy it is to stay focused on someone else’s sin, or need for repentance, even as we confess our own! Especially when it has impacted our lives negatively. But not only can it cause lost sleep and other physical reactions, it can also

create barriers in our hearts – barriers that stand not only between us and others, but also between us and God. It’s the anger, the hurt feelings, the unnecessarily harsh criticism, the unwillingness to let go of a grudge, the thinly veiled self-righteousness, the half hearted apology, the pride that takes many forms, the intolerance of differences, the gossip...

it is the lack of integrity, the hidden addiction that motivates poor choices, the outright words or actions that were intended to hurt...

THOSE are the sins we need to confess, to seek forgiveness for, to repent of, if we are to be truly prepared to make room for Jesus in the center of our lives, and to experience the fullness of the joy and peace he brings. Because the barriers we build between us create barriers between us and God.

So as I studied and reflected on these Advent passages, particularly John the Baptizer’s words, I felt pretty convicted by the Holy Spirit to consider the sins I REALLY need to confess. Where do I need to ask forgiveness? How do I need to repent that will truly remove a barrier, and change a place in my heart that needs changing? I came up with some answers I didn’t necessarily feel comfortable with, but I know are necessary.

And that’s all of our challenge. Think about who it is that you need to confess a sin. That you need to seek forgiveness from. A barrier you need to remove. An area of your heart you need to clean up. A change in heart, attitude, action, you need to make.

Say the words that truly can break down barriers: I’m sorry. Just I’m sorry. No justification. No, while I’m apologizing let me unload on you. No, while I’m confessing,

let me tell you what you need to confess. Just confess.

Just promise to work on changing – feelings, attitudes, behavior, actions. Just promise to do your part in removing the barrier, asking that God’s grace could forgive and heal.

And also, there are times when we need to say, I forgive you...and mean it!

To communicate with sincerity: Let’s leave that behind. Let’s actually allow healing to happen. Let’s learn from this. Let’s commit to remove the barrier and restore what has been broken together.

Advent preparations include confession, repentance, forgiveness, turning our attention to the One who is coming, and has come.

It is moving the barriers between us aside so that we are free to be changed by him, and live holy and godly lives.

It’s time... it’s time to open our hearts and receive Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who forgives, redeems, sets us free to live in peace with God and each other.

It’s time to prepare...