Have Our Hearts Completely Changed?
A Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent 2019
Using Material from the PROCLAIM Preaching Resource
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As an adjunct professor of World Religion at Lorain County Community College, one of the things I had my students do was to make up a scrapebook of all the print news concerning Religion during the course of the class semester! This exercise often turned up some pretty fascinating stories including an article reporting on a new religion which appeared in Melbourne, Australia called “Happy Science.” It was founded in the 1980s by a Japanese businessman named Ryuho Okawa, who says he is able to receive spiritual help from Jesus, Gandhi, Moses, and Zeus.

Happy Science wants to make sure that every spiritual base is covered, and it recognizes the existence of many deities. Okawa claims that he is able to channel more than 500 “high spirits” — people who have had an impact on world history. Guidance comes to him, he says, from Confucius, Socrates, William Shakespeare, Thomas Edison, Margaret Thatcher and...wait for it...Walt Disney.

Such claims are rejected by cult watchers, but criticism has not stopped Happy Science from expanding and attracting big donations. Okawa’s message has grown in popularity. Happy Science claims...again, wait for it...to have 12 million followers around the world...that is about 9 million more adherents than claim membership in the U.S. Episcopal Church...FYI

According to an Australian newspaper called The Age, Okawa predicts that much of the United States will sink at the beginning of the 24th century. He has also written that Martin Luther “will be reincarnated as a Japanese school teacher and help usher in a new religious movement.”

Now, although we might politely and quietly snicker at a spiritual leader who claims to receive guidance from Walt Disney, all new religions seem strange when they first appear. Even Christianity seemed odd and offbeat when it arose as a sect of Judaism back in the first century. It seemed as strange to the people of Judea as Happy Science may seem to us, and no one did more to shock and surprise people than the wild eyed, camel shirt wearing, locust and honey eating prophet named John the Baptist.

John announced the arrival of Jesus by calling people to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” By this proclamation and his ministry of baptism, John prepared the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah predicted he would. “I baptize you with water for repentance,” John explained, “but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” John prepared the people of Judea for the arrival of Jesus, the powerful Son of God who was able to take their faith in a whole new direction.

Like Ryuho Okawa of Happy Science, John the Baptist struck many people as a strange character—what with his wardrobe of itchy and smelly camel’s hair and leather, and his proclivity to munch on locusts and wild honey. John called for repentance, which Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner defines as turning around — turning around 180 degrees. In an article for Sojourner’s Magazine, Buechner wrote: “Repentance means to undergo a complete change of mind, heart, direction. Turn away from madness, cruelty, shallowness, blindness. Turn toward the tolerance, compassion, sanity, hope, justice that we all have in us at our best.”

Unfortunately, back in the first century not everyone wanted to make this kind of a complete turnaround. Not everyone could handle John and his message. John was a strange and
surprising kind of guy, and his message was radical and intense. Many people were accustomed
to making minor adjustments in their lives, but he was challenging them to undergo a complete
change of mind, heart and direction. He wanted them to undergo complete change as part of their
preparation for Jesus the Christ.

“You brood of vipers!” screamed John. And remember, He was yelling at the good and
faithful Jews — the Pharisees and Sadducees — who came to him for baptism. “Who warned
you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance .... Even now the ax is lying
at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown
into the fire.” John did not care that these Pharisees and Sadducees were active members of their
local religious communities. John was not impressed by their claim to be children of Abraham.
“Bear fruit worthy of repentance,” he insisted; or, in the words of Bible translator J.B. Phillips,
“Go and do something to show that your hearts are really changed.”3 Now, I want us to keep that
translation in mind this morning...“Go and do something to show that your hearts are really
changed.”

John the Baptist was angry at the status quo, so he called for repentance — for a complete
change of mind, heart and direction. He insisted that complete reorientation was required of
anyone preparing for the arrival of Jesus.

Repentance, according to John the Baptizer, is not simply a spiritual issue. It is not just
asking God to forgive our sins. Instead, it involves changing our behavior in a world scarred by
poverty, hunger, theft, corruption, threats and lies. Repentance is a turn toward the ways of Jesus,
and a change in the way we handle our resources and possessions, our food, our jobs and our
money. It is a reorientation of our life away from interest in ourselves and toward interest in the
kingdom of heaven. Repentance is a complete change of mind, heart and direction, a change from
what we want to what Jesus Christ wants.

John’s call to repent is not simply a historical oddity. It is not the ancient ranting of a
strange man who called for people to join a weird cult like Happy Science. This call to repent is a
word to us today, and it is a message that is true — true because Christ has come, just as John
predicted. And Jesus the Christ wants each of us to be partners in his work of transforming the
world as it is–into the world as it should be.

The prophet Isaiah paints a similar picture, beginning with the image of a cut-down tree.
“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The
spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel
and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.”4 Advent reminds us the shoot
growing out of this cut-down tree is Jesus, who did grow out of the stump of Israel about 700
years after Isaiah spoke. So the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled not just by John, “the voice of
one crying out in the wilderness,” but by Jesus, the shoot from the stump of Jesse.

“With righteousness he shall judge the poor,” says Isaiah to the people of Israel and to
us.5 Jesus is arriving to bring justice to the poor and to destroy the wicked. In this prophecy,
Jesus is coming to save, but also to judge. In the words of John the Baptist, he “will gather his
wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

When Jesus Christ came to earth two millennia ago, he did not come only to do and say
nice things. Jesus did not invite people to be in a Happy Science cult, but instead he called
disciples to prepare for the kingdom of heaven. John challenged them to prepare by repentance,
by reorientation, by a complete change of mind and heart. To those who were willing to try, Jesus
promised forgiveness of sins, victory over death, and life in God’s eternal kingdom.

So what might it mean for us to prepare for this kingdom? To go and do something to
show that our hearts are really changed? Here is a seasonal thought: Take a minute to calculate how much you will spend on Christmas gifts in the next three weeks. What do you think: $400? $800? $1,000? According the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, the average church in the United States has 186 attenders in worship on a Sunday morning. Now that’s a tad fewer than the combined total attendance who will sit in our chapel and church here at friendly historic St. Paul’s in Cleveland Heights. Our combined total on the second Sunday of Advent will more than likely approach 400, but using the Hartford Institute’s figure as the median number, it means that the average congregation will spend between $37,200 and $186,000. That’s a fair chunk of change going into Christmas gifts — probably a good bit more than is being given this season to those in need of food, shelter and clothing. Perhaps if we were listening to the call to bear fruit worthy of repentance, we would change our hearts and give as much to the immigrants among us, or the working poor, or the homeless, or those whose futures have become frightening and uncertain or the mission and ministry of the church, as we give to ourselves, our families and our friends. It is a thought.

In the end, of course, all of our preparations should be for the kingdom of heaven, that place in which the prophet Isaiah says “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” In this Realm, there will be true happiness, and the righteous anger of John will be replaced by unending righteousness of peace. And during this season of Advent we are reminded by that voice in the wilderness of long ago, to prepare for this place of true happiness and peace every time we truly repent, change our hearts and put more of our resources and effort into the work which Jesus, by our baptism, invites, empowers, and wants us to do. In Nomine Dei. Amen.


5 Isaiah 11:4-5.


7 Isaiah 11:6.