

A Toad's Repentance

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance.

No Advent season would be complete without an appearance from John the Baptist, the voice crying in the wilderness, calling on folks to prepare for the coming of the Lord by repenting of their sins.

John is an important and compelling figure, considered by many to be the second coming of Elijah. Even Jesus showers him with compliments.

Yet, one thing that has long puzzled me is the timing of this call for repentance. Why does this call for repentance come before Jesus' arrival? That sequence has led many evangelists to claim that repentance is a requirement for the salvation that is to come.

My question is, if John's call for repentance was successful, then would Jesus really need to enter the picture at all? If we got ourselves right with God, would there be any reason for Christmas?

In pondering this question, I did what I have often done in researching topics about which I know little; I turned to a children's book. The classic story, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, provides a wonderful perspective on what repentance and John the Baptist, and all the Old Testament prophets were all about.

To set the scene, Mr. Toad has been terrorizing the surrounding area in his new motorcar. He has been destroying property, disturbing the peace, breaking laws left and right, and racking up huge debts.

His friends, Badger, Mole, and Rat finally have had enough and they decide to stage an intervention at Toad Hall.

"You knew it must come to this, sooner or later, Toad," the Badger explained severely. "You've disregarded all the warnings we've given you. I'll make one more effort to bring you to reason.

"You will come with me into the smoking room, and there you will hear some facts about yourself; and we'll see whether you come out of that room the same Toad that you went in.'

He took Toad firmly by the arm, led him into the smoking-room, and closed the door behind them.

“That’s no good!” said the Rat contemptuously. “*Talking* to Toad will never cure him.” But he and the Mole made themselves comfortable in armchairs and waited patiently.

Through the closed door they could hear the long continuous drone of the Badger’s voice, rising and falling in waves of oratory; and presently they noticed that the sermon began to be punctuated at intervals by long-drawn sobs, proceeding from the bosom of Toad, who was a soft-hearted and affectionate fellow, very easily converted-for the time being—to any point of view.

After some three-quarters of an hour, the door opened, and the Badger reappeared, solemnly leading by the paw a very limp and dejected Toad. His legs wobbled, and his cheeks were furrowed by the tears so plentifully called forth by the Badger’s moving discourse.

“Sit down there, Toad,” said the Badger kindly, pointing to a chair. “My friends,” he went on, “I am pleased to inform you that Toad has at last seen the error of his ways. He is truly sorry for his misguided conduct in the past, and he has undertaken to give up motor-cars entirely and forever. I have his solemn promise to that effect.”

“That is very good news,” said the Mole gravely.

“There is only one thing more to be done,” continued the gratified Badger. “Toad, I want you solemnly to repeat, before your friends here, what you fully admitted to me in the smoking-room just now. First, you are sorry for what you’ve done, and you see the folly of it all.”

There was a long, long pause. Toad looked desperately this way and that, while the other animals waited in grave silence. At last he spoke.

“No!” he said a little sullenly but stoutly. “I’m NOT sorry. It wasn’t folly at all.”

“What!?” cried the Badger, greatly scandalized. “You backsliding animal, didn’t you tell me just now, in there—“

“Oh, yes, yes, in *there*,” said Toad impatiently. “I’d have said anything in *there*. You’re so eloquent, dear Badger, and so moving, and so convincing, and put all your points so frightfully well—you can do what you like with me in *there*, and you know it.

“But I’ve been searching my mind since, and going over things in it, and I find that I’m not a bit sorry or repentant really, so it’s no earthly good saying I am; now, is it?”

“Then you don’t promise,” said the Badger, “never to touch a motor car again?”

“Certainly not!” replied the Toad emphatically. “On the contrary, I faithfully promise that the very first motorcar I see, poop-poop! Off I go in it!”

Now Christianity is not a call to constantly beat ourselves up over our failings. I was privileged to give communion to a delightful, 96-year old home-bound woman. When I sat at her table and got the communion kit out, she would say, “Fill that wine glass full; I’ve got a lot of sins that needs forgiving.”

I couldn’t help but think, what could a 96-year old woman who never leaves the house and can barely move possibly do that is so terrible. We don’t need to obsess over sin.

But every so often, we do need to take a serious look in the mirror. Looking in the mirror is often uncomfortable for all of us. But that is what Advent calls us to do.

The time had come for Advent in Toad’s life. The time had come for him to take that look in the mirror. There was a good person available to help him do just that. Toad’s life would have changed for the better if he could truly repent. That’s why it was so important to Badger to persuade Toad to repent. It would bring him new life.

True repentance has its place for all of us. Being sorry and confessing what we have done that we are not proud of is essential for healing wounds and restoring life. That is why it is so important for all of us to repent and turn from destructive ways. That is what the Old Testament prophets came to tell us.

Like Badger, they were sincere and moving and eloquent. Their writing was so beautiful and powerful and they put their points so frightfully well that they continue to stir our souls to repentance today.

John the Baptist performed the same function for his generation. “Christ is coming,” he announced. “What is he going to find when he gets here? It’s time to take a look in the mirror and see what he is going to find. It’s time to change from our destructive ways.”

By all appearances, John was convincing in his call for repentance. Hundreds of people trudged out into the desert to heed that call. But as with Toad, as with the prophets, the question is how permanent is that repentance?

Toad is the most honest character you will ever meet. He defines the problem of sin with brutal clarity. The apostle Paul would have identified with Toad. After all, he is the one who wrote, “I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I find myself doing.” Even when I promise with all my heart to do otherwise.

It's like a woman married to a man with a lot of childish, destructive tendencies. He drinks heavily, loses his temper and batters his wife. The next day he is overcome with remorse over what he did and brings a dozen roses as a sign of his contrition.

The wife is touched and gratefully accepts. But soon after, he beats her again. Again, he comes back sorry with a dozen roses as an apology. Again, she accepts.

But there comes a point in this broken relationship where he comes crawling back with the roses and the wife slams the door and says, "I don't want your stupid flowers. I want you to love me and treat me as though I'm worth something to you. Come back when the roses actually mean something."

When we, as individuals or a community, slide off the rails, we need someone like the Badger or John the Baptist, to stand us in front of the mirror and help us see the error of our ways

It is an important call and in Advent that call to repentance finds each of us. But even in our most serious and sincere self-examination, we have to realize that repentance is not the end of the story.

Did you happen to see yourself in Toad's story? In my better moments, I understand what I should do and how I should live. But as both Paul and Toad discovered, actually doing it is an entirely different story.

Oh sure, in there, in that church sanctuary, with the stirring music, and the beautiful architecture and stained glass, and surrounded by many other voices all joined in praise, we're ready to do anything for God.

When confronted with the ancient words of the Bible, and challenging sermons, and the mystery of communion, we are truly sorry for our sins and we can declare that faith in Jesus Christ is the most important thing in our lives.

It's all so eloquent and so moving and so convincing. Yes, in there, God, you can do what you want with me and you know it.

But once we step out the door, and give our heads a chance to clear, we find that we don't intend to change. On the contrary, the very next person who cuts us off in traffic is going to get a little hand signal.

The next time we go into a voting booth, we faithfully promise to look after our own selfish interests. Yes, we enjoy living better than 99% of the world, and while we will take pity on some and throw a few bucks their way, we don't intend to do anything to change the system.

We're going to act cool rather than admit to any school friends that we care about God. We faithfully promise to trash the environment if it makes life more convenient for us. You can bet that we will study the sports page and Dow Jones more than we study the Bible.

We'll criticize and speak ill of others, we'll snap at our kids, ignore our parents and generally insist on our own way.

When it comes right down to it, we search our minds and find that we are not a bit sorry, really, and that our #1 goal is still our own comfort and entertainment.

And then there's Advent. In *here*, we decorate beautifully and sing praises. In *here*, we have Advent wreaths and children's programs and carols and special services and wonderful stories of shepherds and angels and a manger.

In *here*, we are moved to give more of ourselves to God and to others. In *here*, how can we help but talk about how important it is that Jesus be the center of our Christmas?

But once we're out of this mesmerizing place, will we find that we didn't really mean it? That in fact, we thoroughly intend to go through all the preparations and parties and decorating and gift-giving without giving Jesus more than an occasional nod. Will we complain about how society's materialism is ruining Christmas even as we join the stampede?

Like Badger, the prophets were stunned and heartsick at how their message of repentance was ultimately rejected. God has created us out of love for us to enjoy relationship with God and the world and for what?

There are two takeaways from the prophets and John the Baptist that apply to our lives today.

First, true repentance *is* important. If these trappings of Christmas have some connection to love for God, then it would be a good idea to show it. That is all God is asking of us.

You know from first-hand experience that there are times when a thoughtful gift of roses can bring tears to a loved one's eyes. I am absolutely certain there are times when the wreaths, the nativity scenes, the programs, and Christmas carols bring tears to God's eyes.

But it only happens when these things are an expression of something real. When they are superficial, God has no interest in them. Come back when the roses mean something.

The second lesson is that no matter how hard we try, we cannot get rid of the Toad in us.

In the end, it is not repentance that will solve our problems. John knew that. In his call for repentance, he freely confessed that this was not the final answer. He knew he had only a small role to play. He was baptizing with water. Nothing he could do would change anyone permanently.

If the past has shown us anything, it is that despite our best intentions, despite our best repentance, we disappoint God time and again. We cannot by our own understanding or effort be the people God wants us to be. And here's where the miracle of Christmas enters in.

As the God of Justice, God could not let sin take over. God could not turn a blind eye to those who suffer the consequences of sin. As much as God loves us, God had no choice but to erase injustice. In the prophetic books, God seems right on the verge of destroying his sinful people, as justice demands, when he suddenly stops short:

As we read in Hosea, God makes a dramatic decision. God says, *"No. I will heal their faithlessness
And I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow.
They shall flourish as a garden."*

What just happened?

What happened was that love found a way. God developed a miraculous solution to the justice dilemma. God decided to give us a gift. God chose to pay whatever price justice demands for the wrong we do, for the backsliding we fall into, no matter how much it cost, no matter how much it hurt.

Isaiah was the first to announce that plan. God is coming:

*"Comfort, comfort my people. For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given.
And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace."*

Many years later, John the Baptist announced that this long-awaited plan was no longer in the future. It was urgent. It was now. God was entering the realm of creation to baptize with the fire of the Holy Spirit. And that would create real change.

During Advent, we prepare to celebrate the day that plan went into action.
Thanks be to God.