Bearing fruit *worthy of repentance* “means that our lives reflect a lifestyle, action and choice pattern which are consistent with having repented of sin,” says Arlette D. Benoit Joseph, an Episcopal priest. Bearing fruit *worthy of repentance* means that our actions make “a declaration against the destructive things of this world in favor of aligning ourselves with the beautiful things of the kingdom of God.”

Fruit worthy of repentance. A lifestyle. An action. A choice pattern. A declaration against the destructive things of this world. The New Living Translation of the Bible says it this way: “Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God” (v. 8).

For 21st century Christians, “sin” and “repentance” are loaded words. We dislike the word “sin” because we associate it with shame, guilt, and condemnation. Many of us distrust the word because we see how easily it is manipulated to justify one moralistic agenda over another. And yet, Advent begins with an honest, wilderness-style reckoning with sin. We cannot get to the manger unless we go through John, and John is all about repentance.

Some say that sin is “breaking God’s laws.” Or “missing the mark,” as an archer misses the target. Or “committing immoral acts.” These definitions are not wrong, but I find them incomplete. They do not go far enough. They do not name the fullness of our struggle. Sin, at its heart, is a refusal to be fully actualized human beings. Sin is estrangement, disconnection, unfruitfulness, disharmony. Sin is the sludge that slows us down, that says, “Quit. Stop trying. Give up. Change is impossible.” Sin is apathy. Care-less-ness. A frightened resistance to an engaged life. Sin is the opposite of creativity, the opposite of abundance, the opposite of flourishing, the opposite of a God- envisioned, God-purposed life.

Sin is anything that interferes with the opening of our whole hearts to God, to others, to creation, and to ourselves. Jesus came to give us life, abundant life, not the stunted, diminished half-life that sin creates. John’s remedy for a sinful life is repentance: turning back to God, submitting ourselves to God’s values, committing ourselves to love the people and things that God loves. But to begin that repentant turn, we must first admit our shortcomings to the Savior who comes to judge with the winnowing fork in his hand.

A judgmental Jesus makes us squirm. We like the Jesus who loves and feeds and heals. We don’t like to think about the Jesus who demands obedience and challenges our deluded, selfish realities. I think we squirm because we misconstrue the meaning of judgment. We equate judgment with condemnation, but in fact, to judge something is to see it clearly. In my dictionary, synonyms for judgment include discernment, acuity, sharpness, and perception. All *good* things! So, John’s message of repentance might mean that the Messiah who is coming really sees us, really knows us, really loves us! Maybe the winnowing fork is an instrument of deep love, patiently wielded by the One who discerns in us rich harvests still hidden by sinful chaff. Repentance begins in the parking lot, in the wilderness areas where we find ourselves lost and wandering, and where we decide to turn and face God, and to do things God’s way.

In an article called “Reimagining the church parking lot,” pastor G. Travis Norvell makes some powerful suggestions about ways these hard, wilderness spaces can be better aligned with the beautiful things of the kingdom of heaven. Imagine turning a few parking spaces into a tiny park “for neighbors to congregate and have coffee,” he says. Or an outdoor parking-space-sized chapel: “an intimate holy place to rest, pray and meditate, like a way-station along an ancient pilgrimage route.”

Or imagine a straw bale garden, he suggests. “In one parking space, you can fit 20 straw bales directly on top of the asphalt. These 20 straw bales can yield enough produce to feed a family of four throughout the summer and fall. Imagine the symbolism of a church giving up two parking spaces to grow vegetables and then giving the food away.” Norvell reports that “churches around North America are giving away their parking spaces on Saturday mornings to local farmers markets. For a few hours, a lifeless expanse of asphalt becomes a joyous, boisterous community.” Truly, this is fruit worthy of repentance.

The members of Fairfax Presbyterian Church, in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., know that their region has an affordable housing problem. Home prices are out of reach for low-to-moderate-income residents. So, back in 2017, the church launched a plan to increase the stock of affordable housing. The plan is to build 10 townhouses in the parking lot of the church, in partnership with three non-profit groups: Habitat for Humanity of Northern Virginia, HomeAid, and HomeStretch. What makes the townhouses affordable is the church’s donation of the land, through a renewable 75-year lease. Homeowners will purchase only the structures, making the cost much lower than if they had to buy the land. This model for affordable housing can be replicated throughout the country; congregations may not have much money, but most have valuable land.

Another key is the partnerships that these members developed to advance the project. Habitat for Humanity will build the houses (with homeowner participation) and will handle the mortgages. HomeAid will supply the expertise, time, and resources of builders and trade partners. HomeStretch will own two of the homes and use them to move qualified families from homelessness to sustainable housing. The members of Fairfax Presbyterian chose a lifestyle, an action, and a choice pattern consistent with bearing good fruit. They made a declaration against the destructive things of this world in favor of aligning themselves with the beautiful things of the kingdom of heaven. They repented in the parking lot and are now bearing good fruit..

Such efforts, whether individual or congregational, are designed to prepare the way of the Lord, and to make his paths straight. They are attempts to build a bridge between the church and the community, just as John the Baptist built a bridge between Jesus and the people around him. “I baptize you with water for repentance,” said John, “but the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 11).

John knew that his ministry in the wilderness did not have tremendous value; but his words and his actions fashioned an important bridge to Jesus. In the same way, our church parking lots do not have great value in themselves, but they can be life-saving bridges between the community and Jesus. If we turn ourselves around, go in a new direction, and reimagine what we are doing with our lives and resources, we will bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Prayer: Grace-filled God, thank You for the Gospel of Matthew and the amazing way it offers an understanding into the life and times of Jesus during His first advent, when He came to 'tabernacle' among His people, and for the ministry and message of John the Baptist who was so faithful to his calling as forerunner and herald to the promised Messiah. Thank You that in Your grace You chose to use the Church to forward Your message of salvation to a lost and dying world and thank You that the day is coming when Christ will return to earth to set up His kingdom of heaven on earth. Praise Your holy name, Amen.

**Sources:**

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**Repentance in the Parking Lot**

2nd Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2022 [Matthew 3:1-12](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+3%3a1-12&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Parking lots are vast, open spaces. They are prime real estate devoted to storing parked cars. Parking lots are dry, hard, wilderness areas. Church parking lots sit mostly empty; they are wasted, empty space. If John the Baptist were appeared today, I suspect he would stand out in our parking lots crying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2). For John, repentance begins in the parking lot, in the underused spaces of our lives.

The gospel of Matthew tells us that John was the one about whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight’” (v. 3). In some ways this sounds more like traffic control than theology. John came to prepare *the way* of the Lord, and to make *his paths* straight. John’s goal was to get people going in the right way, moving in the proper direction. If they ignored the directional arrows or entered through an exit, John would turn them around.

Repentance means turning around. It is an about-face; a 180-degree turn; a change of heart or mind. If you are going the wrong way, turn yourself around. “Repent,” says John, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repent is “a hopeful word,” says Pastor Chandler Brown Stokes. “To proclaim repentance is to say that change is possible. A life headed off the road need not end at the bottom of the cliff. A life at the bottom of the cliff need not remain there.”

When John first came on the scene, he was not wearing a yellow parking vest or carrying traffic control wands. He “wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (v. 4). He had a lot of heavy traffic to deal with because the residents of Jerusalem, Judea, and the region around the Jordan River sought him out. Matthew tells us that “they were baptized by [John] in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (v. 6). Repent. Confess. Be baptized. John knew people needed to be redirected. They did the wrong things trying to set things right, which is why he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (vv. 7-8). He told them their high position, their education, and their family connection to Father Abraham would not save them, because God could use stones — perhaps even gravel from the parking lot — to raise up children for Abraham. John told the Pharisees and Sadducees to cut away every part of their lives that did not bear good fruit.