

Second Sunday of Advent, Confirmation Day, December 4, 2022, Year A  
**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA:**

The Rt. Rev. + Alex Farmer, Bishop

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

***“Greetings and Confirmation”***

It is so good to be with you, Saint Andrew's today, on this Second Sunday of Advent. You don't know me, so let me just tell you a little bit about myself. Let's start out by saying that my wife, Jody, and I are so glad to be with you. We hail from Gainesville, Florida, but we are not Gator fans. So can I just put that out there, so I am glad that my red and black is covering up the purple clerical shirt that I wear on a Sunday, so that is where we have been, pastoring a church, a rehab-church that was in crisis that we were able to turn around twenty years ago. By the grace of God, it is a full functioning parish today. God called me to be the Bishop of the Gulf Atlantic Diocese, taking over from +Neil Lebhar. I was consecrated in August, so I am what you call a “baby bishop.” I am also bringing you greeting from Christ the King in Saint Augustine, your sister parish. One of the things that I find helpful is to begin to remind all of us that we are connected.

I am sure that up here in Douglas, Georgia, my first trip to Douglas, that you can sometimes feel as if you are out here on a island all by yourself, and I want you to know that you are not! You are not alone, There are Anglicans all over that Gulf Atlantic Diocese that are praying for you, and praying got your prosperity, and the Gospel ministry. Also, I just want to say that I know how much you love Father John and his wife Marilyn, and how well they are leading you guys at this time, and we are just so thankful for the. John and I have known each other for years, served on Diocesan and Provincial Councils together and it is a blessing for me to be with you all. ( I am already dropping my notes off here.)

So that is a little about me. I was born in Atlanta, and at the age of fifteen I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. For Drew and Lily that are going to be Confirmed in just a little while today, that was when I made my public confession of faith in Christ. I am praying for the two of you as teenagers, or almost teenager and teenager, that God will bless you on your Confirmation Day today.

Well, today I want to just think with you for a couple of minutes, about the Season of Advent. It is a season, a bit of a mix, tying some things together, isn't it? There is this expectation and thane there is also the preparation. Right? There is the expectation of Christmas, and there is the preparation of Christmas. By the Grace of God, the Lord has seen fit that the heavens have opened and my wife has decided that we are not doing any Christmas decorations this year, Thank you,

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Lord! I know for me, and for those of you that are husbands, I am sorry for that, because I know that there is a lot of preparation for you to do, trees to be brought in, lights to be hung, trees to be straightened, lights to be arranged, and all that goes with all that. But there is that expectation of how wonderful it will be – and yet – the preparation. Pay no attention to that woman on the left. (This is your only year off – spoken by Jody) Yes, this is my only year off. By the way, my wife Jody and I, we have kind of a running dialogue.

If you think about the lessons that you've read, there was that expectation in the first couple, and then, there is the preparation piece. I don't know about you, but I really love the expectation part. One of the best Scriptures in all of the Bible, I think, is Isaiah 11. The lion and the lamb laying down together, the child playing at the adder or the cobra's nest. And this little child leading them. What a beautiful image and what Isaiah is prophesizing here is the coming of Jesus. Jesus, who we will celebrate His birth on the twenty fifth of December. Jesus coming, being raised up as an infant, a little child, to bring forth the salvation of the world. When you read through Isaiah 11, we are overwhelmed with the spirit of wisdom, and of grace that is going to be our Messiah, this promised One. As a Bishop, for only a couple of months, already, I am being asked to answer questions. I feel a bit like Solomon, you know, "cut the baby in half!" I wish that was always the answer, right? But it is not, and there is a lot of times when there are difficult things, and I think in our own world, we are looking for someone who can judge rightly. We cannot be overwhelmed by what they see or what they experience, or what they feel, but to judge rightly and truly and to take care of the needy; to take care of the injustices. We all see things that are unrighteous and are wrong in the world and we long for someone to come and take care of them. Humans – we fall short of that, and so when I look at expectation of Messiah Jesus coming, being this Righteous Judge, and being the One who will put to right all the things. There is a great sense of excitement in my mind. And then Psalm 72 that we sang, only reinforces that, this Messiah, and this Messianic psalm. The Messiah will come and He will take care of these things, and He will judge rightly and He will take care of the poor and He will defeat His enemies and they will be dismissed forever. But we live in this in-between time and along with that expectation is the preparation piece, and that is when we come to the Gospel reading that you heard – the words from John the Baptist. We get a lot of John the Baptist this time of year, did you notice that? We get a lot of John the Baptist – John comes to proclaim, "make the way straight for the Lord." "Make a way in the wilderness for Him." And with that comes this call to repentance. And it is like I am really excited about the expectation, but if I am John and you are calling me to preparation and that means

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repentance, well that is not quite as exciting. What is John getting at? I think in our minds, I hear the word repentance and part of me goes back to my childhood. Your mom or your dad, you can fill in the blank, they are going to be home soon – you better straighten this house up because you are going to have to pay for and answer for this mess. And so there is a sense of fear, or a worry about – you know – you better be careful as John says repent, God is coming, and He is like Santa Claus and He is checking the list and checking it twice – He is going to find out who is naughty or nice. The other image that comes to mind is those preachers that are on college campuses. I don't know where these guys come from, but there is no love in them. You know, repent, or burn! Something to that effect, right? They love to go around with their microphones and talk about how bad sinners are, and they stand on college campuses. I have been to the University of Florida and I have seen these guys, and they go on and on. There is just condemnation in their voice – REPENT! Some of them I don't really believe the Gospel, and they are just there to stir up trouble. There is actually a group that wanders around, trying to get you to provoke them or to be provoked by them – so that they can sue you. It is a horrible way to use the word repentance.

I think those are both misunderstandings of what John is telling. The thing we pick up on that as we read this passage from John is that the people are not wailing and weeping, they are not beating themselves, they are drawn to John. They want to be where John is and they want to take action. They are being baptized even though there was not a requirement of a good Jewish person to be baptized, yet they are being baptized because they want to be right with God. If you look at the Scripture that is quoted there from Isaiah 40, that John the Baptist comes saying, when he says, “make a way in the wilderness for the Lord.” “Make His path straight.” It actually comes from Isaiah 40:verse 1. Listen to the tone of Isaiah 40. Isaiah prophesizes comfort. “Comfort my people says the Lord. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity, that is her sin, is pardoned and she is received from the Lord's hand a double for all of her sins. A Voice cries in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” Isaiah is not condemning the people. The New York pastor from the downtown church in New York City, Tim Keller, says “that oftentimes we misunderstand what repentance is. Repentance can sometimes be portrayed in a religious sense that which is fearful, or that which is done to try and gain God's favor.” Neither of these are the motivation of true godly

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repentance. Not at all, it is the repentance that is being displayed in Isaiah 40. It is God's grace and mercy, and the first thing I would say to you this morning is that the ability to repent is actually an act of grace, that God has done something for us. That God has made peace, through Christ on the cross, that we can repent. That we can change our minds and our hearts and our attitudes, and that we can confess that which was done was wrong, and turn back to God is in itself an act of grace. Paul says in Romans chapter 2, it is the kindness of God that leads you to repentance. The kindness of God is an act of grace in God's life that we can have repentance.

We have all known people who – 1 strike and you're out! But given the opportunity to amend our lives and to change a second, a third, and a fourth time, to amend our lives, is an act of grace on the Lord's part. Repentance becomes a reorientation of our lives back to God. Part of the preparation of Advent is taking the time to slow down, with all of the Christmas rush that goes on, and say "Lord, where do I need to reorient my life back to you?" And how does the Lord do that? He calls us into the wilderness. He calls us into the desert.

Years ago back in the first decade of the new millennium, I was invited to go to Israel for a few days, and I got to go out into the Judean desert and be with a friend of mine, who was writing and producing Christian educational material. He was an Arab Christian Pastor from the Galilee, a boxer, actually from Nazareth, believe it or not. This guy is now a Christian and he is preaching and teaching about Jesus in the Judean Desert. We were out there in the desert and there are few places that are more quiet, empty, and hallowed than the Judean Desert. The wind blows constantly. Nothing grows at all. It is the opposite of the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. It is a stark place. But that is where John is, John is out in the desert, in the wilderness area, and he calls the people out to him, out into the wilderness, away from their comfort zone, away from the places where they feel comfortable, where they are just going about their lives. He calls them out to that stark place to gain their attention. Can I suggest to you that the Covid pandemic and all that swirled around and all the politics and all the controversy and all the was a wilderness if you will for the United States. But it is also in my mind, as I look back on it now, it was a movement of God to bring us into the wilderness. So really take away a lot from us for a little while, and to cause us to really think about what our lives are established on and secure in.

John the Baptist claims repentance. Jesus would say the same thing - repentance. Jesus wants us to allow Him to reorient our lives; to redirect our lives – and He needs to bring us to a place of discomfort oftentimes, a place of barrenness, so that He can get our attention to reorient our focus.

Second Sunday of Advent, Confirmation Day, December 4, 2022, Year A Again, quoting from Tim Keller, “repentance is the way we make progress in the Christian life. Indeed pervasive all of life repentance is the best sign that we are growing deeply and rapidly into the character of Jesus. Not only is repentance the grace of God, but it is a way for spiritual growth. I have found this true in my life over, and over, and over again. My friend Mark put it this way, and I totally agree, he said, “In my church, the church that I came to pastor, when I was a younger man, and I was going to turn the world upside down, I was going to grow this church to 500 people, and I was going to write the book, and then I was going to rent and repeat. And I thought I was going to do all of these great things for God, and what I learned, Mark said, was when God first wanted to do something great God must always begin with the preacher.” Every preacher must preach to himself, amen? And every person must allow God to bring them to that place of repentance and renewal within themselves before we do things to change the life of the world.

Repentance often means allowing the Lord to go deeper with things, maybe early in your Christian life you think about, you come to the Lord, to the place of confession in the church and you say, “Lord, forgive me for telling a lie.” But deeper repentance, lifelong pursuit of turning again and again to the Lord, you begin to allow the Lord to say, “why is it that you care so much about that person, and what they thought of you, that you would bear false witness, and why was that more important than being a truth seeker before me?”

Friends, this is the work that the Holy Spirit wants to do in us. It is the glorious work of repentance in our lives. Not once, or just one season of the year, not just for Lent and a little bit at Advent, but all the ways through the years.

Notice that the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the religious leaders are the ones that God really hones in on. Why is that, that God, and Jesus even. Jesus seems to pick on the Pharisees, doesn't He? I think it is because what we who are religious, I mean, we are in church on a Sunday morning, we are also those who can put on a façade for God, and convince ourselves that we don't need to repent. My friend, James Manley, who is the interim rector at the church that I served before I became Bishop, James said, “we love to confess, but do we really like to change?” Ooh, now I am meddling. My friend James, I am not saying it, but him, but I think it bears witness, we love to confess. We confess every Sunday. What does John say? He says, “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” We don't change our lives, we don't amend our lives, to try to please God, to try to make ourselves good enough for God. There is nothing we could do. The grace of God is that Jesus dies for our sins while we were His enemies, Paul says in Romans 5. There is nothing you could ever do to make yourself acceptable for God. God, of His own gift, has

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extended eternal life to us, through Jesus Christ. Christ offers us life; God loves us so much He meets us exactly where we are. But He loves us too much to leave us this way. God loves us so much that He will meet us where we are, but He loves us too much to leave us there.

And that is my third and really my final point this morning. Repentance – I want to reform the word repentance for you this morning. I hope I do this morning. Repentance is the way we are allowed to bring glory to God. You see, God doesn't simply want to do something for us, He does, and through Christ, He has redeemed us from the death and the grave and He has given us life in Christ. But He also wants to do something in us and through us,

There is not time this morning to look at that passage from Romans 15, but when you think about what Paul is saying there, Paul is talking about us, who have repented – who have been redeemed, beginning to display the character of Jesus. He says this: “may the God who gives endurance and encouragement – give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you have followed Jesus Christ. God is glorified by what He does in our lives. We are sorry, miserable sinners, redeemed only by grace, but what God does in the lives of those sinners who repent and turn to Christ, is to begin to transform them into something new.” And that, friends, becomes our witness to the world. That becomes what we say – “this is how I used to think, but this is the way the Lord has changed me.”

This morning, Lily, and Drew, you both come to make your commitment to Christ known. To stand before this congregation and say that you understand that Christ died for your sins, and that He rose on the third day, and that He is the Son of God, and that He has come to give you life, and life abundantly. And so you make that proclamation this morning, but know that you are not doing that alone, just as Paul said in Romans 15. You have been a part of this congregation your whole lives, but you are joining as adult, as mature believers in Jesus with these brothers and sisters. Who will seek to live out that life together. That is an exciting thing, and how God wants to glorify Himself through your witness and through the witness of this congregation, will be something that will be attractive to the City of Douglas, and the County of Coffee, and all of the surrounding areas. That is the work that God is calling all of us to do. Why can we trust that that will happen? Because of the very thing that Paul said. That is the hope that we have in Christ.

One of my favorite Scriptures is from Philippians, chapter 1, verse 6, where Paul says, “May He who began a good work in you, see it to completion.” The way you have seen Christ begin to transform your life already, the things that you used to be

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tempted to do that you don't do anymore - that is just the beginning of what the Lord wants to do in transforming your lives and all of our lives together. He does it by the power of the Holy Spirit. I will lay my hands on Lily and Drew, and I will pray that the Holy Spirit will empower them to live out their life in Christ. That that same Holy Spirit, as John says, comes to baptize us in Spirit and in through with fire, to do that work in us this morning that we want to do.

So you see there is no contrast in the Scriptures. It is just the work of expectation and the work of preparation brought together in the work of repentance. Christ, who has given Himself for us, Wants to do a work in us, and we say "O Come, O Come Emmanuel.