

Second Sunday of Advent – Year A (2025)

At home, the Reverend Johnson was shy, quiet, and humble, but in the pulpit, he was a real fire-and-brimstone preacher, rousing the masses in the name of Almighty God. It was as if he were two different people.

One day, a parishioner asked Reverend Johnson about the dramatic transformation he experienced whenever he delivered his Sunday Sermon. "Ah, shucks," he said, "that's my *altar* ego."

Fire and Brimstone preaching (brimstone is another word for *sulfur*) is a common tactic used by fundamentalist Christian preachers.

There was a time when this kind of preaching was common in Catholic churches. If I were a priest back in those days, it would be perfectly appropriate to refer to all of you as a "brood of vipers," but alas, those days are long gone.

Fire and Brimstone preaching uses the fear of eternal torture by presenting an angry and vengeful God who is willing to condemn you if you do not repent of your sins and get your life on the "straight and narrow path" to heaven.

One famous example of this type of Christian preaching is the 1741 sermon entitled "*Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God*," by Jonathan Edwards.

In this sermon, Reverend Edwards depicted God as a disciplinarian who held the fate of millions in his hands, and if any in his congregation were to displease God in any way, God would fling them into Hell to suffer for eternity and not shed a single tear.

As you might imagine, this method converted many people, so horrified were they by the vivid and horrifying images of Hell and its everlasting fire.

John the Baptist didn't fool around either.

He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage-sale people wouldn't have handled, and when he preached, it was *fire and brimstone* every time.

The Kingdom of God was at hand, and if anyone thought it was going to be like a y at Disneyland, they'd better think again. Shape up, or God will use his ax to an elm, and toss you into the incinerator like chaff.

Your only hope, he said, your only hope, was to clean up your life as if your life depended on it and be baptized in a hurry as a sign of your true repentance.

John the Baptist may have been a bit of a wild man, but his message caught on. We heard of numerous followers who not only took his message to heart but also confessed their sins and received baptism in the Jordan River.

With such an outlandish message, we might wonder why the Baptist became so popular.

Perhaps it was just the right time for the people of God. Maybe he spoke around the start of a new year, when people were looking for a resolution that would change their lives.

Perhaps they were simply weary of the way the world was going and welcomed the call for change. Maybe they were grateful for a voice that was bluntly honest in a way that truly resonated with them.

I think the people of that time, much like us today, were longing for a new direction. And in that longing, they were able to hear John's message as one not of dismissive condemnation, but of love.

For some, this is a peculiar text on this second Sunday of Advent, a week when we express and give thanks for the love God has shown to us. But its placement is fitting and reminds us that God's love is not a cliché, but is a deep, abiding love that extends to us even when we are at our worst.

So often we hear cries of "repentance" as a message of judgment erupting in a geyser of guilty feelings. But John's message is not about a guilt-induced change of heart. That's bad theology.

As theologian Dr. John Burgess notes:

“Repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God’s desire to realign us in accord with Christ’s life.”

So perhaps our question should be less about whether we are ready to repent this Advent and more about whether we are prepared to accept the incredible power of God’s love in our lives?

John lived his life entirely consistent with his beliefs and his calling— by turning his back on the world's standards, he chose to live by God’s. This is just as difficult for us to do today. How do we do it?

“Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” 1 Cor 10:31