

This Advent I bought this pack of cards, like a deck of playing cards, published by Augsburg Fortress, our Lutheran publishing company, for families with young children. There is one card for each day of Advent and Christmas, and each has a little factoid or Bible verse or activity intended to help families with little kids celebrate Advent.

This week, the second week we hear John the Baptist's words, this card explained, *"John the Baptist told people to repent, which means 'turn around.' John tells us to turn around from selfish and uncaring ways. Jesus is coming and will show us a new way to live."*

Then it suggests, *"Do an ordinary task (make a sandwich, wash your hands, walk the dog) while facing backward. Turn around and try again facing forward. Isn't life better when you turn around?"*

For some reason, I jumped right in, doing ordinary tasks while facing backwards all week. And I can tell you, with assurance, that it is difficult to do the following things while turned the other way: get ice from the freezer; pack my purse; walk the dog; stir, cook, prepare food; fold laundry; pick up toys; put on socks.

But, where it really hurt, was for the things that I found impossible to do turned around, things I love and need to do daily, like make my morning cup of hand-pressed coffee or change my toddler's stinky diaper. I could not read a book, my Bible devotional, a Christmas card, or anything, and I could not give a hug.

This little Advent card was right: life sure is better when you turn around.

I typically never think about these basic things. Usually I'm on autopilot, doing the things I need to do virtually unaware. But going through daily actions turned backwards . . . I felt that. And on the tasks that I love to do, doing them not turned around, performing them in this mock "unrepentant" state, well, that hit where it hurts.

John's words to those gathered in the wilderness in today's Gospel also hit his listeners where it hurts. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," he cries, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees." Judgement is coming. Accountability is on its way. "Repent! For the Kingdom of God draws near."

John is asking people to turn around, to reprogram themselves off autopilot, to be baptized with water for forgiveness for sins and consider their actions in daily life.

The people take John seriously. "What shall we do?" they ask. And to help them repent, to help them turn around and consider their deeds, John doesn't give them general advice. He doesn't say, "Be nicer. Act more kindly." No, he gives precise and specific instructions, specific to the gathered people's lives.

He can tell by looking at the people assembled that they do not want for much, so to the crowd, he says, "Give one of your two coats away." He knows the tax collectors typically inflate their rates and skim a portion off for themselves, so

to these local bureaucrats, he says “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” John is familiar with how soldiers strong-arm citizens for personal financial gain, so he tells those who serve and protect, “Do not extort money . . . be satisfied with your wages.”

John’s instructions hit each of them where it hurts: With their possessions. On their wallets. In their pockets.

John knew all these charges would be difficult for the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. Following his instructions would alter their daily lives, requiring them to stop functioning normally, to turn off autopilot, to stop and thoughtfully consider the actions of their jobs and daily deeds, especially the actions that deal with money. It’s a lot like Malachi’s refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap from last week: specific, precise directions for repentance that cut to the core of what they love and turn them back around to face God.

I spent the week literally turned around doing all kinds of things, some of which were silly, none of which involved money. John’s words today push us further than the little Advent card—perhaps even giving us that first shove we need to turn around. The Gospel asks, *What does it mean for us to repent?* What does that *actually* look to live life turned around . . . especially with our money?

Most likely, living life turned around turns us first *away*. Away from our normal lives. Away from our broad consumerist culture. Away from our

systems of earnings-based rewards. It takes us off autopilot and makes us think harder and consider more deeply that second coat or extra food or portion of our money set aside for God.

And then, living life turned around turns us *toward*. Toward God, who gives us grace for free. Toward the Kingdom of God, which through no work or merit of our own is coming into our midst. Toward Christ, whose birth in the backwoods in the middle of a manger we are apt to miss if we continue on autopilot. Living life turned around turns us toward a new way of life: one of God transforming our hearts to be more generous, one of Christ opening our hands to leave gifts at his crib, one of the Spirit releasing our sense of rewards-based thinking and self-centered giving.

Imagining what John's specific instructions for repentance would be to us today, it's likely they would hit us where it hurts. They would be difficult tasks to do because they would fall in the realm of money.

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The week before last, my husband and I, like many of you, sat down to fill out our Commitment Card, to write down how much money we pledge to give in support of God's mission here at Lutheran Church of Our Saviour. You all gave me a slight raise in our 2019 Spending Plan, so as someone who tithes, who gives that 10% back to God, that meant it was time for the number that we write on this line to go up.

But the number we calculated, it didn't *seem* right. It seemed . . . high. Difficult. Out of proportion. It took my thoughts for a spin. It took me out of my financial comfort-zone. And it took me off budgetary autopilot. The number was precise. It was exacting. And it hit me where it hurt.

And that . . . well, that's the point. That's what it feels like to live life turned around and turned toward God. Yes, if we ate them, the fruits worthy of repentance, they would likely taste bitter and tart to our modern, American financial sensibilities, and that's exactly the idea.

Because, according to the normal logic of the world, the logic that kept John's crowds well-dressed and the tax collectors rich and the soldiers selfish, the logic that keeps us with too many coats and too many charge cards; according to that logic, what we write on these cards looks *insane*.

But, once we start living life turned around, once we let the Spirit that baptized us take us off autopilot and reconsider what we love, once we ask God to plant the seeds of grace and generosity in our hearts, and once we start bearing the fruits of repentance, then the rolls reverse, and that normal logic of the world looks *insane* and odd and oppressive in the turned-around Kingdom of God.

In this season of Advent, John the Baptist's words and God's coming gift of grace in Christ call forth fruits worthy of repentance. Fruits both from within and outside of us; fruits from the harvest of our *whole* lives, which includes harvesting and offering fruits that we'd rather keep on our tree.

It won't feel normal; it may seem insane; and it *will* hit us where it hurts. But, as the little Advent card suggests, life is better when we turn around; or, as John proclaimed, these exhortations are good news to the people.

AMEN.