

December 6, 2020
The Second Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Paula Jefferson

C'mon, buddy, let's start over.

If you know me for more than five minutes, you also know that I have a dog named Dursey. He is a Vizsla, a Hungarian hunting dog. This line of dog was bred to be a constant companion to its owner, from the hunting fields to the home.

And, when the breed description says “constant companion” the word *constant* is emphasized in italics.

When my alarm sounds at 5:30am, Dursey is buried under the blankets in *my* bed. He follows me to the kitchen and waits while I start the coffee and feed the cat. Then we walk to the hall closet and he waits while I put on my coat, grab a flashlight, and connect his leash. There are very few footsteps in my day that are not shadowed by this energetic and loving dog.

As a pup, he presented some challenges. Biting, chewing on shoes, unrolling a roll of toilet paper, trash bin diving, tormenting the cat....all the usual puppy stuff. But vizslas are very sensitive dogs. Finding ways to weed out the unhappy behaviors took time. After watching many training videos and having little success, I finally tried the human approach: time out. His kennel became the “time out” spot.

So if Dursey, for example, chose my arm for teething, he would go to time-out. Dogs don't have the same sense of time humans have, so I'd set my watch for a 10-minute alarm. After 10 minutes, I'd open the kennel and say: “*Come on, buddy! Let's start over*”. He'd bound out of the kennel and we'd go back to what we were doing.

Sometimes, we would go through the routine several times before Dursey understood the cause and effect of his time out.

Our readings today present a consistent theme: A prophetic voice announcing that God will come.

In Isaiah, there are familiar refrains like “Comfort, O comfort my people” and the image of God as a shepherd, gathering and feeding his sheep. 2nd Peter reminds us that God's timetable for coming is not a human timetable...we must patiently do the work that draws us into right relationship with God. And, then there's Mark -- The Gospel opens by quoting Isaiah and offering John the Baptizer as the one foreshadowed in Isaiah's prophecy...the one who will cry out in the wilderness.

But, we would be remiss to overlook one other common theme: Sin, repentance, and the forgiveness of sin. This theme drew my attention as I was reflecting on the lectionary. I think of the second week in Advent as a time of hopefulness and peace, and I wondered how sin and repentance fit in that space.

Sin

So, I turned to Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and author who has a knack for saying truth in a memorable way. In her book, *Speaking of Sin: the lost language of salvation*, she digs into the Jewish understanding of sin and repentance. This is important to us because the author of Mark was Jewish, and, of course, John the Baptizer was also Jewish. When John the Baptizer proclaims *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*, I wondered what that meant to the people from the Judean countryside and Jerusalem who came to be baptized in the river Jordan?

In her book, Taylor notes that the Hebrew words for sin, and thus the Jewish understanding of sin, point toward activities that put us out of sync with God. In other words, to sin is to go against God's will.

Taylor says it more colorfully: "The choice to remain in wrecked relationship with God and other human beings is called sin. The choice to enter into the process of repair is called repentance".

Repentance

For Dursey, time out was a powerful teaching tool because it caused us to be separated—something out of sync with his Nature. To me, that separation was just 10 minutes, and sometimes those were the *very* minutes I needed to put a band aid on my arm and let loose some big feelings about the biting. But for the dog, who doesn't have a wristwatch, separation was the point. He was keen to understand what he needed to do to avoid time out.

He learned. And he adapted his behaviors. If he got wound up and began chewing shoes, as soon as he heard the words, "Dursey go to your kennel", he knew what had happened. I no longer needed to follow him and close the kennel door. He went by himself and waited until I went to get him. "OK, buddy, let's start over".

Taylor says it's important to recognize that the "essence of sin is not a violation of laws, but the violation of relationships".

We've all experienced wrecked relationships. There is profound grief when friends who have shared our lives—who are the characters in our memories—break-up with us. Regardless of the reason for the break-up, it is hard when people walk away and don't engage in the meaningful work of reconciliation.

In Taylor's words, "Repentance begins with the decision to return to relationship: to accept our God-given place in community, and to choose a way of life that increases life for all members of that community".

There's some resonance between this understanding of sin, repentance, and forgiveness and the Human Flourishing conversation we are having in Adult Christian Formation. Human flourishing is about living into the fullness of being the persons God created us to be, with God in the center of our lives. Sin sets us on a course that is moving away from flourishing in God's life -- rather than toward it.

When sin seeps into our human culture, we may not even recognize it. But once we do, we see that the opportunity to flourish in our culture is affected by many things none of us controls: where and to whom we are born, our sexuality, our skin color, our native language, our height, our intelligence. How do we respond?

Advent

Advent invites us to ask profound questions of ourselves. Where in my life am I out of sync with God and my neighbor? Where am I moving 10° away from God? Or 30°? Is the trajectory I'm on, the one I really want to be on? Is it the one God is calling me to be on? The journey of repentance, of moving toward God and flourishing, begins by simply recognizing the need for God's Grace.

It is amazing that God, throughout the ages, sends prophets who say to us: God is coming—*now* is the time to repent and seek God's forgiveness. It isn't that God is unaware of our shortcomings, but that God is keen to avoid separation with us. We are reminded over and over again, that nothing can separate from God's Love.

Advent is a time of recalibrating our relationship with God. To do some inward looking...and prepare to receive the gift of perpetual renewal: the inbreaking of God's Incarnational Love.

John the Baptizer wandered about the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Maybe it would be easier for us if he proclaimed, "C'mon buddy, let's start over".