

<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River Mark 1:4,5

In the midst of all the joy and anticipation of God's action in human history with the coming birth of Jesus, one word is very much a part of the story that does not bring up images of joy- repentance. Repentance doesn't really conger up in us positive thoughts. More than likely we might have an image of some down and out type, and some firebrand of a preacher admonishing them to give up their sinful ways. In doing so we feel that the word "repentance" has nothing to do with us.

But the truth is repentance has everything to do with us, and a deep, abiding, and loving relationship with God. The "word picture" of repentance in the original Greek is literally turning around and going in a difference direction. Yes, that might mean going in a different path, which could mean giving up things that are obviously not "godlike" in our lives. That is never an easy process. Like trying to pull up deep rooted weeds in a beautiful garden is giving up bad habits, negative ways of reacting to things, and a typical 21<sup>st</sup> century desire to leave God on the margins.

I read somewhere once that many times when people say they don't believe or really have no interest in God or spiritual things that they may not be sincere in their attitudes. It may just be there is something they are doing in their lives that they know is not something God would really approve of, and they don't want to give that thing up, whatever it is. Such folks might even think they couldn't bear the process of trying. Thus they declare their lack of faith.

But the positive part is that we have determined to turn towards God and be embraced by God's love and light. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of such a turning was the great teacher and theologian of the early church, St. Augustine.

He was a seeker in spiritual life, trying to embrace the many forms of spirituality, and human worldly pleasures of his day. When a voice told him to "pick up and read" a copy of the gospels, he did.

It was at that point he turned and went in another direction. He embraced "repentance". If you read his spiritual classic The Confessions of St. Augustine , you will discover what he knew he had to "turn from" to "turn toward" God. A favorite quote of mine from Augustine sums up for me his satisfaction of turning away from his past and toward God is this :

*"Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until we find our rest in thee"*

Sometimes a time of year such as this, as we anticipate Christmas, our thoughts gravitate toward thoughts of God more than at other times.

Seize hold of that good desire. Take the path of repentance, as challenging as it may be, to turn toward God through the grace and mercy of God's son Jesus Christ.

Pr. John Van Haneghan