

"COME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS (#2): COME HOME TO FORGIVENESS"

(Mark 1:1-5)

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1. (Advent Candle Text: Psalm 85:1-2) -- Read Second Text: Mark 1:1-5 and Pray.

2. [PROLOGUE TO BEAUTY & THE BEAST]

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a young Prince lived in a shining castle. Although he had everything his heart desired, The Prince was spoiled, selfish, and unkind. But then, one winter's night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold.

Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the Prince sneered at the gift, and turned the old woman away. But she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for Beauty is found within. And when he dismissed her again, the old woman's ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful Enchantress.

The Prince tried to apologize, but it was too late, for she had seen that there was no love in his heart. And as punishment, she transformed him into a hideous beast, and placed a powerful spell on the castle and all who lived there.

Ashamed of his monstrous form, the beast concealed himself inside his castle, with a magic mirror as his only window to the outside world. The Rose she had offered was truly an enchanted rose which would bloom until his twenty-first year. If he could learn to love another and earn her love in return by the time the last petal fell, then the spell would be broken. If not, he would be doomed to remain a beast for all time.

As the years passed, he fell into despair, and lost all hope, for who could ever learn to love... a Beast?

3. Some of you may recognize this as the prologue for the 1991 movie "***Beauty and the Beast.***" But even though that story was based on a make-believe 18th-century French fairytale, ¹ in many ways, it's also a parable that accurately describes our real, human condition.

A--After all, truth be told, there's some kind of "beast" that lives within each & every one of us. ²

1--It may take the form of an arrogance towards life or other people; a pride about our own self-importance; struggles with life dominating issues like alcohol, sex, drugs smoking, gambling, or over-eating; or even bondage to things like gossip, bitterness, anger, judging of others, and covetousness.

2--And yet, the Bible says that these kinds of a *outward* behaviors are merely symptoms of *inner* spiritual pride and rebellion.

B--How does Isaiah 53:6 puts it?... "*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way*" -- as in the fairytale, we've become "Beasts" dominated by the "spell" of sin.

4. Of course, most of us don't usually see the "beast" within because we've become masters at cover-up -- on the surface, out in public (and even at church) we wear emotional garments and masks that make us appear *to others* to be princes/princesses who have it all together.

A--And yet, beneath our outward veneer often lives a raging "beast" struggling to be set free -- that is: turmoil and trouble in our private lives that we dare not let anyone else see (sometimes not even allowing *ourselves* to acknowledge!) ³

B--Does any of this sound familiar? And would we even *admit* it if it *did*?

C--Growing up, I had a wonderful family who were kind and loving, but not accustomed to sharing feelings or showing emotion (even among ourselves).

1--So, I learned from a young age to hide my hurts, pains, and other feelings behind an emotional mask.

2--And behind that mask grew a raging beast that led me into some unhealthy habits that I've struggled with for much of my life.

3--And for a long time, I sought to discover a way out -- a way to break free of the "inner beast" I'd become and be transformed again back into the person I wanted to be.

5. Well, in the fairytale, you may remember that the Beast was transformed as he turned away from his "bestly" attitudes and behaviors, and instead embraced *forgiveness and love*.

A--That's exactly what happened to me in my life, and it's also what we find in today's two scriptures from Psalm 85 and Mark 1.

B--So as we continue our series "Come Home For Christmas", today I want us to talk about **FORGIVENESS** as the **second of five spiritual "postures/attitudes" during Advent that can help us focus on the true meaning of Christmas.**

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6. In today's first scripture from Mark 1, Verse 4 (NRSV) says that "*John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"

A--Now, let's be honest... John does not fit easily into our cultural Christmas celebrations: it's hard to imagine him singing "Jingle Bells," stuffing a stocking, or trimming a tree.

1--He's not the kind of guest we'd normally invite for Christmas dinner, & his "politically incorrect" message would certainly not sell many Christmas cards.

2--But the gospel writers nevertheless all agree that *he's* the one who came to prepare the way for the Savior -- he comes like a spiritual bulldozer, pushing away the spiritual clutter and plowing through the emotional trash that too often gets in the way of us finding God, and of God finding us.

B--And he does this by calling us to something known as "*Repentance*."

1--Now, in the Bible, to "*repent*" means to turn around and go in a new direction --...

2--...To turn *away from* the rebellious path of our own self-desires and *re-orient* our lives back towards God and His love through faith. ⁴

7. But what we have to understand is that what gives repentance its transforming power is *not* simply the elimination of *sinful behavior*, but the presence and acceptance of ***Forgiveness***.

A--If you listened carefully, you may have noticed that that's exactly what today's Advent wreath scripture reading was saying -- Psalm 85:1-2 said, "*Lord,... you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin.*"

1--The "*restoration*" of Jacob (i.e., his change/transformation), you see, was *made possible* by God's forgiveness/pardon.

2--The same was true for me in my life, and can also be true for *all* us in *ours*, as well: spiritual change/transformation begins with us *accepting and living in* the mercy/forgiveness of God.

B--Christian author James Harnish says that...

"The 'mercy of God' is God's unexpected forgiveness and grace, which we find precisely at the point where we realize that we have gone off in the wrong direction and turn around to come home.... [It's] the welcome we know... we don't deserve, but [the] one that[s] given to us anyway when we turn toward home." ⁵

C--Now, when you and I take John the Baptist's "*wilderness*" road of repentance, it can often be a painful, difficult journey -- so difficult, in fact, that many people simply refuse to take it at all (after all, some of us are more comfortable living with the "beast" within than in doing the hard things it might take to be set free!).

1--And yet, when you and I *DO* choose the way of repentance -- when we're willing to struggle through what we've done and the consequences of the choices we've made (that is: when we're no longer afraid to acknowledge and confront the "beast" that we've become) -- ...

2--...Then we can experience the "*forgiveness*" of God which sets us free on a path towards spiritual and emotional peace and healing.

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8. You see, today's two scriptures teach us that we whose lives are so often dominated by the power of *sin* can be changed into the likeness of Christ by the power of God's *forgiveness* and love.

A--They tell us about the transformation that awaits each of us when we're willing to walk the difficult "*wilderness*" path of repentance by choosing to receive God's mercy/forgiveness.

1--And just as the enchanted rose in the French fairytale enabled an ugly, selfish beast to be changed through the love of a beautiful woman, ...

2--...So the "spell" of "beast-hood" in our *own* lives can also be broken through the loving power of *another* "rose" -- the one the scriptures call the "*Rose of Sharon*" (Jesus). ⁶

B--And what I've discovered is that the change promised by *him* is *not* merely superficial or temporary, but authentic and abiding-- as one author once wrote,...

"Christmas... [does not mean] rearranging the furniture to make room for a Christmas tree. [It's not] about dusting off the surface of the table so that none of the Christmas guests will notice the dust underneath. [Instead, it refers to a] radical transformation that penetrates into the deepest part of our human personality and begins to shape & transform us into the likeness of God's love revealed in Jesus." ⁷

C--And unfortunately, some of us are living life just like this -- rearranging our *outward* lives so no one sees the clutter and dust that we struggle with *inside*.

D--But yet, God offers us a way *out* of all this!

1--Back during America's bicentennial celebration in 1976, an ad by British Airways appeared in newspapers all across the USA trying to lure modern-day sons and daughters of the American Revolution back to Great Britain for a visit.

2--It featured a man dressed in a traditional British costume, with Big Ben and the houses of Parliament in the background. He was waving a tiny American flag, and his captioned words read, "*Come home, America. All's forgiven.*" ⁸

9. Well, today God is giving an invitation to every *Christmas* pilgrim among us to come "home."

A--To "come home" to a place where "*all is forgiven*" by Him.

B--To "come home" to a place where God (through *our* repentance) can change/transform us -- inside and out -- from an ugly "Beast" into a beautiful child of His.

10. So, whatever "far country" or place of inner "beast-hood" that you find yourself in today, God is inviting you to "*Come Home to [His] Forgiveness.*" Will you come home today?

11. [PRAY for people to "come home" to God by acknowledging their sin and accepting God's forgiveness by inviting Jesus to be their Lord and Savior...]

12. [9am and 11am CLOSING HYMN: #219, "What Child Is This?"]

ENDNOTES:

¹ *La Belle et la Bête* was first published by French novelist Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve in 1740. It was abridged, rewritten and published again in 1756 by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, and finally appeared in its current form in an 1889 re-write by author Andrew Lang. According to researchers at universities in Durham and Lisbon, variations of the tale have been told for over 4000 years.

² This "beast" has been formed by our own sin and selfishness. Some of us have been beasts so long that we've given up all hope of transformation or restoration -- like the Beast from Disney's movie, we've fallen into despair over the state of our being.

³ For example, even when good, caring friends ask us how we are, many of us reply with the "Christian four-letter word" that starts with "F": ... "*Fine*" when we know perfectly good and well that we're *not*. We're like the two sons of Luke 15 -- we've either (1) consciously chosen to run away from home (the "prodigal son"), or (2) in our self-righteousness we've become lost even staying at home (the older brother).

⁴ "*Repentance is not only saying, 'I'm sorry.' It is also saying, 'I'm through'*" [Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990)]. "*Repentance is to be sorry enough to quit*" [Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry#9595].

⁵ James A. Harnish in Christmas Reflections from James Moore, Reginald Mallett, J.Ellsworth Kalas, James A. Harnish, and Nell W. Mohney (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 2001), "*Come Home for Christmas: Come Home to Mercy*," pp. 147-148.

⁶ Read Song of Solomon 2:1.

⁷ James A. Harnish in Christmas Reflections from James Moore, Reginald Mallett, J.Ellsworth Kalas, James A. Harnish, and Nell W. Mohney (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 2001), "*Come Home for Christmas: Come Home to Mercy*," p. 146.

⁸ Story told by James A. Harnish in Christmas Reflections from James Moore, Reginald Mallett, J.Ellsworth Kalas, James A. Harnish, and Nell W. Mohney (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 2001), "*Come Home for Christmas: Come Home to Mercy*," p. 148-149.