I have often wondered if Jesus had a scheduled visit with us one Sunday morning what would he preach on. If Jesus planned to preach on peace, what would he say? How would we prepare ourselves to meet Jesus? Would we make sure the lawn was mowed and looking tidy with weeds pulled. Would we plan a lunch and strive to sit next to him? Would we hang on every word he said to us? Would we change the altar linens to white, and make sure everyone is notified that Jesus plans a visit? You get the idea … we would put our best foot forward by using the best of everything we have in the church as we prepare to meet Jesus.

Yet, if John were Jesus’ PR person, he would be telling us not to worry about anything I have just mentioned about preparing our sanctuary for a famous visitor like Jesus. John is told by the Spirit of God to proclaim a different marketing plan of preparation …. Repent. I’m not even sure how I would explain these words of John in a weekly newsletter, because no one, including myself, would ever think about repenting before meeting a famous spiritual leader. The truth is, marketing the word, repent, makes me feel nervous. I don’t have a problem thinking about repentance privately for myself, but to design a banner for repentance is a little tricky.

I suspect that other modern-day Christians might also feel nervous if they were told to repent before meeting a famous spiritual leader like Jesus. The stereotype of the old-fashioned preacher hammering on sin and making people feel guilty doesn’t sit well with most educated Christians who come to church on Sunday. So why preach on repentance, then, if the word just makes us squirm? Because John the Baptist is not your typical street preacher … he is given one message to give to the people he meets, and that means all people, poor, middle class and the rich, are to hear the same message, “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.

John, along with other spiritual seekers, went into the wilderness of Egypt and the Middle East to devote themselves to prayer and ascesis, or what is called the practice of spiritual disciplines. Now if an aspiring athlete for pro-football was told to go into the desert to run miles to get in shape over several months, most athletes wouldn’t hesitate to do it, however, leaping into a spiritual discipline doesn’t fit most people’s idea of success.

Let me digress for a moment as I tell the story of a monk named, Abba Dioscorus; Abba Dioscorus was once found weeping by a younger monk. When the younger monk asked why he was weeping, Dioscorus replied, “I am weeping for my sins.” The young monk knew Dioscorus had led a holy life for many years, and said to him, ‘My father, you do not have any such sins.” Dioscorus told him, “Truly, my child, if I were allowed to see my sins, three or four men would not be enough to weep for them.” If I were allowed to see my sins. This is an interesting statement to ponder.

What would it feel like to see the selfish twists of my heart, my greed and self-pity and whatever else my ego strives to cover up? How do I manipulate my inner life so it stays, not only hidden from other people, but also from myself? I recall Jesus even saying one time, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” The starting point for the early church was this awareness that sin resides in each person, not the kind of sin where we are to abuse our bodies to remove sin, or even the kind of sin where we become ‘worm-like’ in our thoughts toward ourselves. The sin we repent from is missing the best that God has for us. What thoughts or actions keep us in hiding? This is not condemnation, but right diagnosis, so we can be healed and experience God’s wholeness for our lives. Repent, for God desires us to be whole.

A few years back I read the book, “The Delight of Being Ordinary: A Road Trip with the Pope and the Dalai Lama.” During their road trip they are striving to stay incognito as they travel around Italy, which adds an element of humor and seriousness as they both share with each other what life means. The Dalai Lama makes thinking about repentance easy, he says, “All difficulties in this life, every moment of difficulty, come from the distance between what is and what we want to be.” We don’t want to be ill. We don’t want to grow old. We don’t want to die. We don’t want to be accused of something we didn’t do. The Dalai Lama says, “We want predictability and comfort, and these two wishes stop us from accepting who we are as people.” The Pope’s response to the Dalai Lama is this, “The world is bursting with neurosis, and it seems to me that the source of this neurosis is a lack of appropriate acceptance, an urge to control everything, to resist God’s divine guidance in whatever surprising or difficult form it takes.”

Sin, forgiveness of sin, and repenting or changing the way we live, is not a popular topic to talk about in the 21st Century, yet, when I recalled these short word clips from the Pope and the Dalai Lama, I was reminded how very small and ordinary I really am. What would I feel if I saw my sin clearly enough just to accept myself, warts and all, and ask forgiveness, not just once a week, but an hourly or daily focus on cleansing myself of denial, where I become comfortable looking at myself clearly, by questioning my motives and asking the why behind my actions? I rather think I would experience the discipline of repentance that John the Baptist proclaims as being necessary to meet Jesus.

You may be thinking, ahh, what does repentance have to do with peace, our second Sunday focus in Advent? If I allow myself to be fully known by God and myself, even those parts of myself that I can’t see or bear to see, will the normal stresses of hiding be exchanged with an attitude of acceptance that can lead to a feeling of deep peace within myself, with others, and with God. I venture to guess, a loving embrace of my warts and all will guide me into feeling deep peace. And this unveiling and acceptance of our sins is God’s promise of healing, that we have the opportunity of feeling deep peace. Deep sorrow will lead us into deep peace.

I know that repentance is not a popular subject to talk about. John was prepared in his heart, mind, and soul to prepare others to repent … his mission of repentance lead to his death. You see, our culture doesn’t buy into such nebulous and spiritual wisdom, because as the Dalai Lama said, “All difficulties in this life, every moment of difficulty, come from the distance between what is and what we want to be.” Jesus spoke of living in the moment, where feeling deep love of each other will lead us into paths of holiness and peace.

Ending with the prayer in Philippians seems the only right thing do following a talk on repentance and forgiveness, “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.” Then we will feel peace. Amen.