

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”^[a] ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“It’s always the same: a morning arrives in November, and my friend, as though officially inaugurating the Christmas time of year that exhilarates her imagination and fuels the blaze of her heart, announces, ‘It’s fruitcake weather! Fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat.’”

Thus begins the short story Truman Capote penned threescore years ago, *A Christmas Memory*, which has been a mainstay favorite of American anthologies.

“It’s fruitcake weather!” Did you know it?

Fruitcakes are one of those foods particularly popular during a certain time of year. They’ve been the Christmas dessert of English royalty for a very long time.

Fruitcake can age **25 years** and still be eaten (and enjoyed), as long as it contains the proper preservatives and is stored in an airtight container, according to the *Christian Science Monitor* magazine. Perhaps it is this **longevity factor** that led my wife to long ago opine that there is only one fruitcake in the world. And people just gift and re-gift it over and over again, each one using as a doorstop for awhile before passing it on.

But I know that this is not true, because in 2016, you can buy a TEN PACK of my father's favorite Fruitcake – the CLAXTON brand (“a world favorite for over a century”) – for a mere \$66.95.

But 7 year old Truman Capote and his 60 year old friend would never resort to BUYING a fruitcake. It was always a labor of love to make their THIRTY-ONE fruit cakes from scratch.

A LABOR OF LOVE.

It's fruitcake weather!

I've been thinking about fruitcakes ... because I have developed this strange habit during this time of year – thinking about remembrances ... thinking about people who have gifted me with their music, their quirky little habits, their Christmas customs ... that have become a part of the patchwork quilt of who I am, and of how I celebrate the birthday of Jesus.

I've been thinking about fruitcakes ... because I read once more in this annual Gospel lesson of how that old crusty harbinger of the Day of the Lord, John the Baptist, went around the countryside, eating and dressing like some organic-sand-dwelling-escapee-from-a-religious-freak-show telling people that they need to repent ... and they need to **BEAR FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH** [“WORTHY OF” by other translations] **REPENTANCE**.

And I wondered if **FRUITCAKES WOULD BE FRUIT WORTHY OF REPENTANCE**.

The REPENTANCE (and the Greek word used is “METANOIA”) to which John calls the people carries a **DOUBLE CONNOTATION**: (1) **CHANGING YOUR MIND** and (2) **CHANGING YOUR BEHAVIOR**.

- Sometimes we say we are sorry and don't change our behavior.
- Sometimes we TRY to change our behavior, without really changing how we look at life.

- Neither one-handed attempt at clapping will work.

John's call to repentance is repeated in Matthew's telling of the first sermon preached by Jesus, and which becomes the primary message of Jesus' whole ministry (in all four Gospels) – **CHANGE: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND.**

- **ADVENT** – this season in which we are in the second of four Sundays – is to **CHRISTMAS**, as **REPENTANCE** is to THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND.
- **ADVENT** – this season in which we today celebrate the Sunday of **PEACE** (out of **Hope, Peace, Joy** and **Love**) is descriptive of all four benefits of what we can experience once we enter the Kingdom of Heaven at Hand.
- **Repentance is not the end in itself**; it is the **first step in the process.**

It might even mean cleaning out the poison of vipers (Pharisees/toxic church) that focus on just cleaning up your morality without changing how you see life, a by-your-bootstraps way to self-salvation.

No, we must bear fruit worthy of repentance – a **new way of thinking**. Repentance is important – a NEW WAY OF THINKING as well as NEW WAY OF ACTING. But Repentance is not the END GAME.

A comparison of the two: **Repentance** to **New Life**; **John the Baptist** to **Jesus**, was put to verse by John Shea:

**I can denounce a king
 But I cannot enthrone one.
 I can strip an idol of its power,
 But I cannot reveal the true God.
 I can wash the soul in sand,
 But I cannot dress it in white.
 I devour locusts and turn them into honey.
 But I cannot lace his sandal.
 I can condemn the sin,
 But I cannot bear it away.**

I believe that FRUITCAKES are an acquired taste. You've got to get over the reputation of "doorstop" in order to enjoy them. It requires a NEW WAY OF THINKING and a NEW WAY OF ACTING.

But **being FORCE FED fruitcakes will not accomplish that goal.**

In the forward to her 2006 book *Ask the Fruitcake Lady: Everything You Would Already Know If You Had Any Sense*, then-95-year-old Marie Rudisill explained how she came to be hired as an official advice-giver on *The Tonight Show* in 2000:

*I noticed Jay Leno kept talking trash about fruitcake in his opening monologue. He said it was the worst food on the planet, suitable only for building retaining walls. That burned me up, because I knew that he had never tasted good fruitcake. So I wrote him a letter telling him that he was **uninformed, ignorant, and basically unwelcome**, and that if he wanted to taste real fruitcake he should try some of mine. Of course, he fell in love with me after that. A lot of men are suckers for a strong woman who will put them in their place....*

For me ... strangely enough ... it was the connection to my deceased father, who for some reason loved Claxton fruitcake, that encouraged me to give Fruitcake a second chance. I tried eating some fresh ones. I tried some really good homemade ones. Now, I have developed a new way of thinking and a new way of acting: I like fruitcake.

Advent is about exploring new possibilities in order to allow Jesus to do something new in your life. **Our part is called repentance – BUT JESUS PROVIDES THE CHANGE.**

In Advent, we simply get ourselves ready, and let Jesus do the rest.

There's a banner that will go up outside the church, telling the good news of Christmas to everyone who drives by: **GOD BECAME HUMAN SO THAT WE CAN CLAIM OUR OWN DIVINITY.**

That means we have to allow for a new way of thinking: No longer can we say, ***"But I'm ONLY human."***

That means we have to allow Jesus to bring us into a new way of behaving – where we discover our full humanity in claiming the divine image in which we were made.

Doing lots of beating yourself up for “not getting Christmas right” won’t do it.

The main way of NEW THINKING and NEW BEHAVIOR (**FRUIT WORTHY OF REPENTANCE**) is accomplished GENTLY. Gently. Gently. Gently.

It’s like the PEACE that we celebrate this Sunday.

- We SIMPLY canNOT make PEACE happen in our lives.
- We simply cannot make ourselves stop worrying.
- We simply cannot make ourselves stop all of the agitation of our senses to which we are addicted.
- We can ONLY make room for Jesus to come in.

That MAKING ROOM is called REPENTANCE ... making some time and space where Jesus can come and sit with us and GENTLY open our minds to a new way.

We do NOT have to eat fruitcake in order to experience the PEACE of Christmas. But we do have to accept the possibility of doing life differently ... and then giving Jesus a little bit of time and space, on a daily basis, to introduce us to something new.

And this year --- CHRISTMAS 2016 – REALLY CAN be a SURPRISE.

Repent/change your thinking and behavior! The **Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.