

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

(Mark 1:1-5)

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**[PROP NEEDED: Video Clip from "*Beauty and the Beast*"]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-4-11]

--I--

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

2. **[WATCH VIDEO CLIP, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST (0:01:07-0:03:31) -- Time: 2:24]**

A--"*Who could ever learn to love a beast?*" ...Who indeed? You know, none of us wants to hear it, but truth be told, there's some kind of "beast" within each and every one of us <sup>1</sup> -- *none* of us are merely sweet, innocent children who've inadvertently wandered from God.

B--No. When we're honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge the painful truth that in many ways, each of us are selfish, rebellious children who -- in large ways and small -- have spurned God's love and gone our own way. <sup>2</sup>

1--Now, this rebellion can take many *outward* forms: a cocky-ness / arrogance towards life or other people; pride about our own importance or self image; problems with life dominating issues like alcohol, sex, drugs, gambling, or over-eating; and even bondage to things like gossip, bitterness, anger, and covetousness.

2--But all of these are merely *outward* symptoms of *inner* spiritual pride and rebellion.

C--Isaiah 53:6 puts it this way: "*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way*" -- as in the Disney movie, 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 -- up front, on the surface, we've got it all "together."

A--When we go out in public (and especially when we come to church), we put on our mask of "togetherness" and pretend that everything is "A-ok / hunky-dory."

B--And yet, beneath our veneer of "togetherness," our personal and private lives are filled with turmoil and trouble that we dare not let anyone else see -- though on the outside we may dress like a prince or princess, deep within there's a raging beast struggling to be set free. <sup>3</sup>

C--Does any of this sound familiar? (and if it did, would you admit it?)

1--You see, whether we acknowledge it or not, it's all around us -- ...

2--...In everything from a well known college football coach who's discovered to have molested young boys, to parents who wrestle with the sexual lifestyles chosen by their grown children, to good people who commit suicide seemingly "out of the blue," to "upstanding church folk" who leave their spouse & family and run off with someone else!

5. So what's the answer? How do we get free of the "inner beast" within ourselves? How can we be transformed once again back into genuine human beings?

A--In the Disney movie, you probably already know that the Beast was transformed as he turned away from his "beastly" attitudes & behaviors, and instead embraced forgiveness and love.

B--And today's two scriptures (from Psalm 85 & Mark 1) essentially tell us the exact same thing.

C--So as we continue our series "Come Home For Christmas", today we'll be talking about the second of five spiritual "postures/attitudes" that can keep us focused on the true meaning of the season.

--II--

6. In today's scripture reading from Mark 1, Verse 4 tells us that "*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"

A--In other words, here we have the story of John the Baptist calling people to experience the transformed life that we're talking about today precisely through **Repentance & Forgiveness.**

B--Now, John does not fit very easily into our cultural Christmas traditions: 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 of 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.

C--And he does it by calling us to "*Repentance.*"

1--Now, in the Bible to "*repent*" means to turn around and go in a new direction -- to turn *away from* the rebellious path of our own self-orientation and *re-orient* our lives back towards God and His love.

2--It's a turning *away from* sin & selfishness, and a turning *towards* God through faith.<sup>4</sup>

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 power and acceptance of God's ***Forgiveness*** (which is an integral component of repentance).

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

1--In other words, the "*restoration*" of Jacob (i.e., his change/transformation) was made possible by God's forgiveness/pardon.

2--And the same can be true for us, as well: true 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."* <sup>5</sup>

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

D--But friends, 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 acknowledge and confront the "beast" that we've become)...

1--...then we can experience the "*forgiveness*" of God which sets us on a path towards genuine spiritual and emotional peace.

2--Not just "*peace*" as the absence of sinful *behavior*, but as a deep, inner healing and wholeness for our very heart and soul.

--III--

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 today's video 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 love of another "rose" -- the one the scriptures call the "*Rose of Sharon*" (Jesus). <sup>6</sup>

B--And what's more is that the change promised here 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."<sup>7</sup>

C--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 God offers us a way out of this.

1--Back during America's bicentennial celebration in 1976, an ad by British Airways appeared in newspapers all across the country 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.*"<sup>8</sup>

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 invites 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. [11AM CLOSING HYMN: #219, "What Child Is This?"]

### **ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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*.

<sup>4</sup> "*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].

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Read Song of Solomon 2:1.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.