

The Percy Jackson book series appears to be all the rage among teen readers these days. Percy is a demigod - his mother is a human and his father is the Greek god Poseidon. The stories are about Percy's adventures with the Greek and Roman gods. Just like the ancient myths about these gods, they tend to behave rather badly, and can be particularly naughty with each other and with humans. Problems in the world and chaos among humans often result from the capers of the gods.

Well, I say just like the ancient myths about these gods because that is exactly the environment our gospel writer Mark wrote into. Stories of the gods were entertaining, even if few people really believed them. While these stories didn't exist in book form there were plenty of oral versions floating around. Think of them like fables, fairy tales and campfire stories. Perhaps they just entertain, perhaps they teach a moral; but they become part of a culture's self-understanding. And like Percy Jackson there is an indefinite number of adventures people can imagine.

Imagine the impulses our gospel writer Mark felt as he wrote his gospel. This was not going to be yet another myth about a person who had a divine father and a human mother. Nor was it going to be book 8 in a series to go on for as long as the publisher determines it is profitable to pay for new stories. Mark was called to write a definitive work about the acts of salvation by which God decisively entered the world and acted.

We read the very beginning of Mark's gospel today. Does he start his story with Jesus' birth? No. He doesn't talk about angels or shepherds or wise men or stars. There is no flashy or poetic beginning. He starts right with the meat of the matter ... beginning of the gospel of Jesus, the anointed one, the Son of God.

This is reality, not a made-up story. God has acted. God has entered the world and acted to change its course once and for all. Henceforth there will be a new way of relating to God.

It is this new way of relating to God that is key to understanding what comes next. Who is the first person we

actually meet in Mark's gospel? John the Baptist. He is the messenger who is preparing the way for God's coming. Now he doesn't have bulldozers and earth moving equipment to make a highway in the wilderness. He has a different tool to get people to create a superhighway into their hearts for God to travel. That tool is repentance.

There were numerous ways for Jewish people to get forgiveness of sins in those days. The most common was some form of going to the temple in Jerusalem and have the priest perform the right ritual along with you offering an animal sacrifice. There's one big problem to this. Rich people can afford more forgiveness than poor people. If you're poor, you'd better not mess up because you can't afford the sacrifice. Imagine being a day laborer where you'd work all day to make enough money to feed your family for that day and then you'd have to work all over again the next day for the next day's food. You're so busy providing for your family that you don't have time or money for forgiveness; in other words, to be in right relationship with God.

For centuries the prophets cried against this system but it continued anyway. The forgiveness that John the Baptist proclaims is not forgiveness based on ritual and sacrifice. It is forgiveness based on repentance. To repent is to turn your life in a completely different direction.

If God was acting in a definitive way then the preparation for him needed to be definitive too - a complete turning from sinful ways. People were to stop exploiting, stop hurting, stop seeking revenge, stop trying to get one up on each other. A new life was to be built upon God's immanent arrival.

John's call to repentance assumed that Jesus would arrive soon and that Jesus would arrive with fire and destruction for those who were bad. In this light we can understand the urgency of John's message - turn now before it is too late.

Well of course Jesus did arrive on the public scene soon, but the Bible tells us that he wasn't what John or other people expected. It turned out that God's definitive action was not going to be the kind of violent struggle like you'd find in the Percy Jackson series or any of the myths. It turned out the

only violence and judgment Jesus was going to bring was going to be upon himself. God's ultimate action was not what was expected. But God's ultimate action was good for us all. God's ultimate action would reveal a new way of life for all who would follow after, us included.

John the Baptist's call for repentance cries out across the centuries and comes to our ears too. We are to prepare the way for the Lord and make his paths straight - make a superhighway into our hearts for God's travel. We do that by turning from old ways and redirecting our lives to new ones.

That's a hard thing to proclaim this time of year. Even if you yourself decide that Advent will be a time of self-examination and repentance for your own life there are still numerous social and professional obligations to attend to. People expect presents from you. They expect you to show up to the office party. They expect you to be happy - or at least put on a good show of holiday cheer because something is wrong with you if you aren't.

I hear the 50th anniversary of the Charlie Brown Christmas special is this year. You've probably all seen it - maybe even 50 times! Charlie Brown is in his usual depressed state. He has good reason to be depressed for he sees that Christmas has become too commercialized. And look at how everyone pressures him to be happy. The whole show has a sweet and faithful message but part of me is annoyed. I want to say, let Charlie Brown be depressed. If that's what he feels then let him feel it. Don't force him to be happy.

Try turning this season into a season of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and you'll find pressure against it.

Okay, so let's say you're a super Christian. My colleague Johanna Rehbaum is offering mid-week Advent services this year. They are Taize style services of darkness and quietness with a lot of repetitive singing. Go ahead and make time for those services because that's the right thing to do, but you'll find that you're just cramming one more thing into your already overstuffed schedule. You'll make taking a break for reflection and repentance one more thing to do in an already too busy season.

I suppose we're in a real bind when it comes to following John's command.

Here's the tough news. Do you think it was any easier for people in John's day? Do you delude yourself into believing the myth that life was any simpler or less complicated for them? It wasn't. The issues may have been different but the pressures were the same.

This is the true struggle to repentance - and its true power. The person who can truly repent from the oppression of life that keeps him or her captive to the pressures is freed.

Here's an ironic thing about repentance. It is not the tough challenge that we think it is requiring uncommon will power like a dieter turning away from a platter of donuts. Repentance is a gift from God - it is freedom.

God did not come to make your life harder or more complicated. The definitive action of Jesus is to bring you the

gift of freedom. May you have the courage and the grace from
God to repent and be free - to be open to God's actions and
newness of life. Amen