

December 12, Advent 3C (Luke 3:7-18)

The first step of repentance is telling the truth about ourselves.

by [Marlena Proper Deida Graves](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue

I live in the United States of America, a modern-day empire that has gained riches at the expense of others. Here is an abbreviated litany of our greedy and deadly forays: We had a penchant for squatting on and stealing Native American land and then exterminating Native American peoples because they became a problem to get rid of when they refused to cede their land and assimilate. The North and the South alike can trace much of their wealth to chattel slavery and the commercial industries surrounding it. Warring with Mexico paved the way for us to continue our westward expansion.

Even after the Civil War, our country did not learn its lessons. The United States abolished slavery and gave African American men voting rights. But by 1877, we'd had our fill of Reconstruction and began to renege on its promises. Some historians say that African Americans only really gained their freedom—the freedom they were granted in 1865—with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Yet even now we are rolling back voting rights.

If we turn our gaze to how our nation treated other non-Whites, we see our sordid history of exploiting workers and then deporting or imprisoning them. Think of the Chinese we recruited to come build the railroads and then summarily barred from entering our country from 1882 to 1943. In 1917 we passed an immigration law that barred people in much of Asia from entering the United States. We did not want southern and Eastern Europeans coming in either, so a literary test was added to the new law.

And let's not forget the Japanese American citizens we herded into concentration camps after Pearl Harbor. After that we continued massive deportations of those we

invited to work here, exploited the poor here and elsewhere, oppressed minorities, and propped up dictators in South America who allowed us to extract the riches of countries less powerful than our own. We still commit many of these same injustices.

Rehearsing this litany of American transgressions, even while leaving myriads of them off the list, is utterly exhausting. But it is the first step in repentance—because we are telling the truth to ourselves.

My thoughts turn from this litany and our need for national repentance to John the Baptist, who, a little more than 2,000 years ago, boomed forth to the crowds pilgrimaging in the desert, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’” I have always wondered how a country supposedly founded on Christian principles could act so un-Christian. What we fail to remember is that repenting of our sins is distinctly Christian.

Of course, repentance is more than just facing ourselves and saying, “I am sorry.” That’s a start. But producing fruit in keeping with repentance, as John compels us to do, means making amends. With the Holy Spirit’s help it means refusing to continue down destructive, death-filled, and toxic paths. It means choosing life in all its vulnerability, fragility, and glory—life in Christ. Such a life is a full life (John 10:10). Repentance in all its forms brings us life, healing, shalom. When we confess our sins to one another and pray for one another, we will be healed (James 5:16).

Neither you, nor I, nor our nation can produce fruit in keeping with repentance unless we take the first step in telling the truth about ourselves. Only then can we make amends, change, and embrace shalom. If we need help in knowing what it means to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, I suggest reviewing the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. These show us clearly what John the Baptist was getting at: how to produce fruit in keeping with repentance—and thereby return to the selves and nation God has intended us to be. I wonder what it would look like for our national and institutional structures to repent?

Simply proclaiming that this is a Christian country founded on Christian principles is akin to saying, “We have Abraham as our Father.” It is akin to citing our heritage and genealogy as proof of our Christianity. Citing our Christian credentials or background or church attendance does not a Christian make, and it does not let us off the hook.

No, like the Jesuits, we have to practice daily conversion to Christ, to practice repentance, and then to commit to whatever we can reasonably do to make things right as a nation—in our institutions, in our relationships, and in our individual lives. This will keep us from the same path of death and destruction that I recounted above—a path that has us finding creative ways to hate God, ourselves, our neighbors, and creation.

Repentance requires humility. It is painful. Perhaps when we embrace John the Baptist's call to daily "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" we will begin to be a nation of integrity.