

“Advent and Repentance”

Matthew 3:1-12

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For those ministers who follow the Christian Lectionary--those common readings which many mainline churches follow each week—they are preaching on John the Baptist this morning based on the testimony of St. Luke. I TOO am taking a hard look at John this morning, but rather than turning to Luke’s gospel, I’m going to focus on what St. Matthew has to say about him INSTEAD. Now when you think of Advent and the events concerning the birth of Christ, John the Baptist is not exactly the FIRST person who comes to mind. In fact, he might not be the tenth or even the TWENTIETH person one would expect to see or hear about. In this season of abundance and festivity and joy, we encounter an ascetic Old Testament prophet who from his post in the desert calls persons to forsake their sinful ways or face judgment if they don’t. He comes across as a stern, angry, and even SELF-RIGHTEOUS figure- not exactly what you’d expect or even WANT to hear from at Christmas, a time when we’re really trying to FORGET such things in our life!

And yet, I believe John the Baptist is not an OPTION for us during the Advent season but rather a NECESSARY PREREQUISITE if Christmas is ever going to have full effect for us. In some ways, you might say that John and Jesus were actually two sides of the same coin, that Jesus in a sense played “good cop” to John’s more serious “bad cop.” He was, as one well-known preacher has described him, “the Doberman pinscher of the gospel,” God’s “watchdog who makes sure no one wanders into holy precincts unaware.” John’s primary message was always in keeping with many of the Old Testament prophets and their call to repentance. He was the voice of the Law, calling Israel to turn from her unrighteous practices with a change of heart. He was the reminder that the love and grace of God does not come cheaply, that it made ultimate demands upon one’s life and if one wasn’t prepared to go the distance, then there were ultimate consequences awaiting. This is a message that no one likes to be reminded of ESPECIALLY at Christmas time.

As rabbis will tell you, true repentance always demands action. The Hebrew word *teshuva* is generally used to mean “repentance,” but it literally means “turning.” *Teshuva* expresses a process of reorientation that demands a complete change of mind, heart, and behavior. It requires 1) recognizing our wrongdoing; 2) expressing our regret; 3) doing our best to reconcile with the injured party or, at least, make appropriate restitution to those we have wronged; and 4) changing our ways. We achieve full *teshuva* or “repentance” when faced with the reality of our wrongdoing, we acknowledge the transgression, then choose an appropriate and ethical response. At that point, we will know we have turned away FROM evil and TOWARDS righteousness.

We find the concept of "repentance" all throughout the Old Testament such as in Isaiah 55:

*Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God,
for he will abundantly pardon.*

and in the Psalms:

*I acknowledged my sin to thee,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord";
then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:5)*

and:

*I confess my iniquity,
I am sorry for my sin." (Psalm 38:18)*

and again:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to thy steadfast love;
according to thy abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin! (Psalm 51:1-2)*

It is similar to the Greek word "metanoia" which in the New Testament is translated as "repentance." It TOO suggests the act of "turning around," of moving out of one place and into another. This turning process can be physical, spiritual, emotional, theological, or moral. The word doesn't appear all too often in the Bible but it is implied throughout through such words as "conversion," "regeneration," and "being born again." To repent is to make a U-turn, to start at square one again, to go back to the drawing board. There is a Greek word "metamelomai" that means "change of mind" but all TRUE conversion involves much more than an alteration of one's thinking or opinion- TRUE repentance (or "metanoia") involves a change of DIRECTION, a change of HEART, a change of WILL. Judas, following his betrayal of Christ suffered a "change of mind"- then went out and hung himself. Peter, on the other hand, experienced TRUE conversion- a "change of heart," then went out and REPENTED!

Yet, without first understanding the need for repentance, the need to ask God for his mercy and grace in our lives EVERY SINGLE DAY, it would be impossible to discover the flip-side of this- the love and forgiveness one experiences at the hands of Jesus Christ. The Bible is clear that without repentance, there can be no grace, no forgiveness, no sonship or daughterhood with our Heavenly Father. Where JOHN reminds us how our God is a righteous God who has standards as to how we should live, JESUS, on the other hand, is the one who enters the human heart and takes into himself all those things that separate us from God. He is the one who steps into the gap between our inner life and our external behavior. Where the Law could only critique and condemn, it is the love and grace and forgiveness we find through Christ that enables us to fulfill the Law, regardless how imperfectly we might.

Of course, the GOOD news is that our God is both gracious and patient with us, one who promises to INDEED forgive us our sins if we come openly and honestly with humility before him. As we are told in First John:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all

sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:5-9)

Let me see if I can illustrate the difference between those who experience a change of mind versus those who undergo a radical change of heart, a complete redirection in their lives. Several years ago, serial killer Joseph Paul Franklin was put to death by lethal injection in a Missouri prison after more than thirty years on death row. Between 1977 and 1980, Franklin tried to start a race war by robbing more than a dozen banks and committing at least twenty-two murders. In an interview shortly before his execution, he blamed a childhood filled with poverty and abuse for helping to transform him into a racist killer. But he now claimed he was a changed man for while in prison, he had found God. He condemned the American justice system for not operating according to the Bible, for the scriptures say that when someone repents, God forgives them, and once forgiven, everything is forgotten. "But the STATE doesn't think that way," he complained to the interviewer. He went on to explain that he's now cured of his "mental illness" and it happened through education. When asked if he thought something lay on the other side of death waiting for him, his response was, "Yeah, but it's not a burning hell because I'm serving the Lord. It'll be the kingdom of heaven for me because I've repented."

Now I'm not in the position to judge ANY person's future state and it certainly WAS possible that Joseph Paul Franklin MAY have had a true death row conversion. But I can't help but be somewhat skeptical of someone who refuses to take real responsibility for his life and actions, ESPECIALLY when he blames his parents for everything that went wrong in his life, when he condemns the criminal justice system for not acting in a Christian-enough manner by refusing to pardon him, and, above all, when he demonstrates such little pity for the many victims and families of the victims he had hurt and even destroyed through his murderous actions. To me, it smacks more of one of those death-bed confessions where the person thinks he can live as recklessly as he wants and yet confess his sins in the last minute in the belief that God will forgive him anyway. Such confessions make a mockery of what REAL repentance is all about.

Now let's contrast Franklin's account of conversion with the conversion of ANOTHER figure, one who ALSO died by lethal injection- not at the hands of the state but rather by his OWN hands- from putting way too many drugs and way too much alcohol into his system over a period of many years. I'm speaking of the country legend JOHNNY CASH, and in a critically-acclaimed biography by Robert Hilburn which was published only a couple of weeks after Franklin's execution, we discover that he TOO had come to a place of decision in HIS life. Based on extensive interviews with family members and intimates, Hilburn describes him as a complex and bitterly-conflicted man who spent too many nights trashing his motel room and becoming so drunk or drug-addicted that he'd have to be jailed. When he performed his famous Folsom Prison concert in 1968, Cash admitted he was higher than a kite, that he'd never taken so many pills before in all his life. But Hilburn, who knew Cash well, doesn't candy-coat the deep emotional scars he left on his friends and loved ones, how he was absolutely horrible to them with his constant abuse and affairs and love of partying- a real contrast to what the public's image of him was.

However, at some point, Johnny came to realize how he needed a radical intervention in his life, that he had to take full responsibility for his actions and admit how much he was driving

away the ones who loved him the most. That's when he turned to God for help and at last experienced the love and forgiveness he could never provide for himself. From that time on, he became a much different man ENTIRELY. His music expressed a level of vulnerability and honesty never before seen, but ALSO conveying the message of hope for a new beginning which one can find when one looks earnestly to God for help. As Hilburn writes:

But the one thing he said over and over again was "I want people to know about the problems in my life, the times I've stumbled and fallen and lost my way, because I want them to see, if they have those problems in their own lives, they can eventually be redeemed." That was his great message, that you always have hope- no matter how much you're suffering, you're out of a job, you're in jail, whatever it is, there's always hope.

Cash became a living example of what he preached. In 2002, a year before his death, he spent months feverishly composing "The Man Comes Around," a dire warning of Judgment Day accompanied with a video that unsparingly showed his own wasted and depleted body for everyone to see. He considered that haunting song to be his final testament, saying that he tried to praise Jesus with it and that if someone was still listening to his music fifty years hence, he hoped that THAT would be the song they would be listening to. Unlike Joseph Paul Franklin, with Cash there appeared to be SINCERE contrition. He not only took responsibility for his actions but he genuinely lamented all the hurt he had caused everyone through his own selfishness. He spent the remainder of his life doing everything he could to help others experience the same redemption, the same love and grace he HIMSELF felt unworthy of.

And so we return to the question that was asked at the beginning of this sermon- what does all this talk about John the Baptist and repentance have to do with all the festivity that surrounds the birth of the Christ child this time of the year? Well the message of our text this morning is THIS- that apart from knowing the personal freedom that can come from true repentance, and apart from the reconciliation this act engenders between us with each other and with God, there could BE no Christmas joy in our lives. You see, there are no shortcuts to life with God. *One cannot get to Christ without first going through John the Baptist; we cannot arrive at that manger in Bethlehem without first having immersed ourselves in the cleansing waters of the Jordan.* Advent is much like the Christian life- it must always begin with the sincere act of contrition, recognizing our wrongdoing, expressing our regret, and then doing our best to reconcile with those we have hurt. It is to open our hearts up to God and then admit we're sorry for the sin in our life, sorry for any impediment or barrier that may possibly get in the way of our relationship with one another or with God. Only after demonstrating such humility as THAT will any of us ever experience the kind of awe and humility engendered by the birth of Christ babe in the back of that cattle stall; only THEN will the true meaning of his birth hit home, that it signifies the entrance of God into our world to save us from ourselves and all the chaos and problems we've created. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, through this season of Advent and beyond, grant us the courage to admit our failures and shortcomings to ourselves and to you, knowing that you are faithful and just to "forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Then lead us into the presence of your Son that, like those shepherds and angels and wisemen of old, we might worship and adore him with loving and clean hearts. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.