



Advent 2: December 4, 2016 St. Cuthbert's Church

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
`Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"

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

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

I don't know about you, but I did not necessarily want to hear our Gospel reading about John the Baptist this morning. To be honest, I did not want to hear once again about his clothing, his food, his wilderness haunts, and his words of repentance. I did not want a prophet intruding into the dark gestational time of my Advent, the one time in the year when I give myself permission to withdraw, to wait in the dark for the return of the light and the arrival of the Holy Child of God.

And yet here he is again with his rough clothes and his hard, confrontational speech. He, of course, is not aware of my Advent agenda of quiet waiting, but instead, drawing from Isaiah, he comes as wolf to my quiet lamb, lion to my silent ox.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

As disruptive as he may be to my quiet Advent waiting, there must be some reason why we're asked to encounter John during Advent, to go through him to complete our journey to Bethlehem to see the Holy Child of God. For while only two of the Gospels mention anything about Jesus' birth, all four Gospel writers introduce Jesus by talking about John. It must have to do with his message—his message of repentance.

John was, after all, in the repentance business. His baptism was a baptism of repentance—not, of course, about becoming a Christian, because John was not a Christian. Instead, when John waded into the water with people, he meant to get them ready for their meeting with God, which he believed would take place very soon. And how were they to get ready for God? Not just by feeling sad about the way their lives had gone or regretful of the wrong-headed choices they or others had made. No, John was asking them to repent, which meant redirecting their minds and their hearts and deciding to act in different ways. And if they did this, John also maintained, the past would be no more—"what they had done, what they had said, what they had made happen and what had happened to them would no longer run their lives." Repentance, then, was a way to have a second chance at everything.

I, of course, grew up in the Southern United States where the word "repentance" appeared on roadside signs or came at us from the mouths of street corner preachers. Skeptical and suspicious, my siblings and I came to believe that the word was the angry and bitter vocabulary of those who lacked social skills or just didn't know better. After a while, it was simply a word we ignored.

But as we got older and lived longer what we discovered was this: that the signs urging us to repent that we read from the car window on the way to our grandmother's house, that the street corner preachers shouting repentance to us as we walked by—both of these were naming something we would actually need in our lives.

For we would need an actual practice we could follow, something we could actually do when the inevitable happened—when our lives went off the rails, or, for whatever reason, our lives went dead or became death-dealing to others. We would need repentance—a way to begin again and again by turning our minds and hearts and actions toward life and away from death, all of which delivered us from the grasp of an imprisoning past and gave us hope for a new future. And we would learn that we would need to do this many, many times.

Last week at a meeting at the Synod Office a member of this diocese was talking to me about one thing she was doing for Advent. She said that she was working on giving possessions away that were cluttering up her house so that there would be more empty space that God could fill. In a strange way repentance is like that—for in it, we give away or we decide to let go of attachments, attention and actions that somehow block the space where God might meet us. We turn away from something and toward something else and before we know it, a new shoot is growing from a stump we had thought was dead.

Where does your life need repentance in this season of darkness, of open space and of waiting? What can you do to let go of attachments, attention and actions that somehow block the space where God is waiting to meet you? What do you want to turn your mind, your heart and your actions toward? As you do, what new young shoot do you imagine springing up and out of the center of your life?

I remember one session with a spiritual director some years ago. I was working on a situation in which I had simply messed up, had made a mistake in the way I had handled something. In the midst of my increasingly fainthearted justifications of what I had done, my spiritual director turned to me and said: “Why don’t you just let yourself out of jail on this one? Just go back and tell the person you’ve had a change of mind, a change of heart about this. You might even consider apologizing.”

I know it sounds simple-minded and oh-so-easy, but this little phrase about “letting myself out of jail,” and then giving myself permission to own up to the real changes of mind and heart that I was actually having and, yes, to apologize, taught me more about repentance than all the little signs and the street corner preachers put together.

This is what John the Baptist offered people: a fresh start, a way to out of jail, a beginning, not an end. For he knew there was someone coming after him who had something much stronger to offer, although he did not know who or what that was. And no one, I think, was more surprised than he, when he looked up a short time later to see who was wading toward him through the water—not the messianic king of his imagination come with great political power to rule, but a king without a crown, a lion and a lamb, a little child come to lead us.