

“Supporting Cast of Advent: John the Baptist”

Luke 3:1-6

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The Christmas season is completely underway now that Thanksgiving has come and gone. How many of you have begun decorating your home for Christmas? How many of you went shopping on Black Friday? Has anyone turned their car stereo to a radio station playing Christmas carols 24/7?

How many hours do you spend decorating your home? How many hours, do you estimate, are spent coming up with gift ideas, researching the best place of purchase, paying for them then wrapping them? What about Christmas baking? How much time is spent preparing goodies for friends and family? Preparing for Christmas takes a lot of time doesn't it?

Just as the pace known as Christmas frenzy begins to speed up, we encounter John the Baptist in the gospel passage this first Sunday of Advent. John asks us to examine ourselves rather than bask in holiday wonder. He asks us to check our spiritual compass to determine the direction of our lives. John looks almost comical—dressed in camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey--but his message is hard-hitting, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Repentance is such a confusing concept for most of us Christians. Does repentance mean feeling sorry for our mistakes? Is it a matter of trying to be a better person? Is repentance really necessary now that we are new creations in Jesus Christ? For some Christians, the mandate to repent only serves to dredge up feelings of guilt and unworthiness.

A group of youth and I were discussing the tension between grace and law, between acceptance and judgment, between God as a God of grace and God as a God of judgment during confirmation class. One youth asked, “If God is going to forgive my every sin, why do I need to repent in order to receive God's forgiveness? His question was right on target. His question gets at the uncomfortable struggle we all feel listening to John the Baptist.

How come we have to change in order to receive God? What right does John have to judge us? Who is he to criticize us or assume we are not okay just the way we are?

The answer is John does not. John's words--those words crying out in the wilderness--are not words of criticism. They are words of choice. John does not judge our worth, he invites our wholeness. He offers us a future rather than criticizing our past. He assures us it is not too late to repent – to literally turn around. That it is not too late to change the direction of our lives—so we will not miss the new life God promises to bring our way. What John and Advent remind us is that repentance is not about moral worthiness so much as it is about God's desire to realign us with Christ's life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as it is about God's power to transform us into Christ's image.

John preaches in the wilderness and is a voice crying out in the wilderness. Wilderness brings to mind the memory of the people of Israel in the wilderness. God led the people of Israel out of bondage into the wilderness, yet they were afraid God brought them there to die. And what did they do while they were out there? They complained, "at least we had enough food to eat while we were slaves." They sinned and rebelled against God in the wilderness. Yet, that is also the place where they learned to trust and obey God. Part of our journey during Advent is remembering Christ has brought us out of bondage to sin and reoriented our life. We too have our wanderings in our Christian lives yet God promises to keep pointing the way ahead.

It would be impossible to try and live according to God's will on our own. Perhaps that is why John mentions baptism as people confess their sin. For in our baptism, God claims us for new life in Christ. As scripture says it, "buried with Christ in baptism, raised to walk in newness of life." And God gives us the Holy Spirit to help us. We have the help of the Holy Spirit to live as Christ would have us live.

I remember getting after one of my teenager's one day about the state of her room. I was not happy about it and the tone of my voice made that all too clear. Right in the midst of my tirade, words came to mind, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord." Now I have had nudges from the Holy Spirit before but this was like a 2 x 4 upside my head. It was the equivalent of a knock-down punch. It did, however, get my attention. I immediately realized my words were not acceptable in God's sight, nor mine to be quite honest, and I changed my tactic. I changed my words and the tone of my voice. That is the work of the

Holy Spirit, is it not? To make us more Christ-like in our dealings with others.

There is a medieval legend about a man who was decadent and irresponsible in many ways. He did possess, however, the desire to want to be good. He went to a costume maker who gave him a costume to wear—complete with a halo wired to his head. As the man walked down the street, he was tempted to act in his typical way but remembered the halo on his head. So he decided to act differently. Rather than ignore a beggar on the street he encountered, he gave him money. When he got home from work and his wife began an argument, he chose to listen rather than argue back. He began to treat his wife with more respect. He began to treat his co-workers with more respect. He refused to cut corners at work. Eventually he returned the halo costume. As he was leaving the costume shop he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and he saw a permanent halo glowing above his head.

It seems he had become what he did. His “change of behavior”, his repentance—had opened a space for God to transform his life.

By turning around and behaving in a new way—this man found a permanent new direction for his life. Repentance is what we do so God will have space within us to make us into new people. Repentance is actually an act of faith as we trust Christ is working within us to purify us and through us the world to make them both a dwelling place fit for himself.

“Prepare the way of the Lord,” John reminds us this first Sunday of Advent. Spend time preparing the way of the Lord in one’s own heart, mind and spirit in the midst of Christmas preparations. Prepare some room for God to work yet again in your own life. “Repent, change direction, move toward God,” John declares. Spend time preparing the way of the Lord in the community through your actions.

“Prepare the way of the Lord” is the good news John brings to us today. “Prepare the way of the Lord.” May it be so for you and for me this Advent season. Amen.

Disclaimer:

I have since apologized to my daughter for mentioning her messy bedroom in this sermon. She graciously accepted my apology with a “don’t sweat it, Mom” response.