

God's Invitation to Prepare: Confronted by John the Baptist William J. Ingersoll
Luke 3:1-9 First Presbyterian Church
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In order for us to get to Bethlehem, we must first be confronted by John the Baptist. So the church, in its two thousand year experience with the Christian life, has decided. On this second Sunday of Advent, the appointed gospel lessons from the lectionary are about John the Baptist. "By choosing these lessons," points out one minister, "the church is saying that if we really want [to prepare] to go to Bethlehem's manger, then first we should meet the Baptist, and that is not a comfortable prospect at all."

Yes, John is not a character you work up in ceramics and place beside the gentle lambs and baby Jesus in the nativity scene. He does not go with the angels and their songs of peace on earth, good will toward all people. And his food, according to Mark's gospel is wild honey, well, that's okay, but *locusts* - thanks for the lunch invitation, John, but I'm afraid I'll have to take a rain check!

And can you imagine receiving a Christmas card with a John the Baptist theme? It might go like this:

Dear Friends,
Our family thinks about you this Christmas season:
"You brood of vipers!
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come...
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."
Season's Greetings from the Ingersolls!

To be sure, John is a very unsettling figure there at work in the Judean wilderness. And yet there is no getting around him. Do you realize that only two of the four gospels mention anything about the birth of Jesus. But all four gospels introduce Jesus by telling us about John. It is as if they cannot tell the story of Jesus without John. John is the watchdog who makes sure no one wanders onto holy ground unaware. He is the guard dog, who tests all those who think they want in. Anyone who cannot handle him cannot handle the one who comes after him. Yes, in order to prepare for Bethlehem, we have to confront John the Baptist. “As different as they will turn out to be,” says the minister Barbara Brown Taylor, “John’s judgment is part of Jesus’ grace. They go together, like night and day, because those who know nothing of judgment need nothing of grace.”

“John’s business was repentance. It was what his baptism was all about. It was not about becoming a Christian, because John was not a Christian....When John waded into the water with people, he was cleaning them up for their audience with God, which he believed would take place very soon. He begged them to change their lives in preparation for that event, and he was not below scaring them half to death if that was what it took – anything to wake them up and make them see that they were sleepwalking through their lives, and confusing their own ways with God’s ways....”

“If they could come out of their comas long enough to see what was wrong and say so, then he would wash it away for them, forever. Or [better], God would. The same God who could make children of Abraham out of river rocks could make children of God out of them right there... All they had to do was

consent, repent, return to the Lord, and they could start their lives all over again before they even dried off.”

“The past would lose its power over them,” says Taylor. “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. They would [seldom] hear those nagging voices in their heads that told them how bad they were, how ruined, and in the silence that followed they would be free to begin again, listening to God’s voice this time, telling them how blessed they were, how beloved.”

As scary as he sounds, John made a pretty great offer. No wonder folks walked for days and days to hear him. “Left the plow in the furrow, left the bread in the oven, turned out school early” (Fred Craddock). I’m sure a few of them came out of curiosity. I can imagine the teenagers in that country, sitting around on the hoods of their camels, nothing to do. “Have you heard John?” “No.” “Well, let’s go hear.” Yes, they came, just to hear him proclaim again and again a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

What may sound like a threat to us sounded like a hopeful promise to them. We hear the word “guilt” where they hear the word “forgiveness.” Part of the problem, it seems, is our resistance to the whole idea of repentance.

I’m indebted to several recent commentators for this perspective, but you see, the way most of us were taught it, repentance means owning up to how rotten you are. It means saying out loud, if only in your own soul, that you are a selfish, sinful, deeply defective human being who grieves the heart of God

and that you are very, very sorry about it. It means dumping all your pride on the ground and stomping on it, since pride – as in ego, arrogance, vainglory – is the root of so much evil. And it can be. I was taught by theologians influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr and others, that the root of all sin is pride.

But what if pride isn't the only problem? What if the main thing many of us need to repent of is not our arrogance but our utter despair – that things will never change for us, that *we* will never change, that no matter what we say or do we are stuck forever in the mess we have made of our lives, or the mess someone else has made of them, but in any case that there is no hope for us, no beginning again, no chance of new life? Now *that* is a problem, and it's been a growing one in recent years.

My friends, I cannot begin to tell you, after 30 plus years of pastoral ministry, how many people I know who are all but dead with despair. It happens all kinds of ways. Let me just mention a few from previous churches I served.

As the economy began its steep downturn, a family man lost his job and stays home with the kids. For a while he meets his goal of an interview or more a week, but after months of rejections his energy just runs out. Finally, one afternoon his wife finds him sitting in front of the television with an empty six-pack of beer at his feet.

Or a woman, abused verbally and sometimes physically by her husband. It's a worsening pattern in their marriage. But she won't leave. Even the few

times she does, it's only briefly before she returns. Her self-esteem is now so low, her despair so great, that she stays and stays and is abused again and again.

Or a surly teenager. He doesn't know what's wrong with him, and it's hard to find someone to talk to about it. His father is rarely home, his mom turns every discussion into a lecture, and he doesn't want anyone to see him going into the counselor's office at school or the pastor's office at church. So he starts hanging out with peers even moodier than he is and for a while, he feels better. When his mother is called to the police station because he is arrested for shoplifting at Wal-Mart, no one is surprised. And when his mother tells him he's been nothing but trouble since the day he was born, something inside of him hardens. It remains to be seen how much trouble he can be. I can't help but wonder.

Yes, for many people, especially in our day, especially in light of all the violence in the world and our seeming inability to do anything about it, despair is a much more serious problem than pride will ever be. It is so serious that we have a baptismal vow aimed right at it. Question: Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? Answer: I do. It is a John the Baptist vow and it is not about keeping an eye on our rottenness. Instead, in light of God's grace and mercy, it is about keeping an eye on our despair and never letting it get the best of us.

To commit ourselves to a life of repentance means not giving up on ourselves, no matter how many times we have to repeat the process. By God's grace, we will keep turning around, every day if need be. We need never say never. I'll never recover, I'll never get it, I'll never learn. Why? Because we believe in God's goodness far more than we believe in our own badness.

“The kind of repentance most of us shrink from is all about us, in case you hadn't noticed. It is all about me, me, me, the miserable sinner. No wonder it can be so revolting. The other kind of repentance, the healing kind, is far more interested in God. It spends more time looking at the kingdom than at the mirror. It has more faith in God's power to make new than in our own power to mess up.” (Barbara Brown Taylor).

“Let me say that again. ”The other kind of repentance, the healing kind, is far more interested in God. It spends more time looking at the kingdom than at the mirror. It has more faith in God's power to make new than in our own power to mess up.

Yes, “to repent means to come to your senses,” says the minister Frederick Buechner. “It's not so much something we do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I'm sorry’ than looking to the future and saying, ‘Wow!!’.”

It is what John the Baptist offered people: a fresh start, a way to face our despair. He offered it as a beginning, not an end. He knew there was someone

coming after him who had something much stronger to offer, although he did not know exactly who or what that might be.

Not as a threat but as a promise, John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Yes, my friends, you can't get to Bethlehem without being confronted by John the Baptist. Well, I take it back. You can get to Bethlehem without confronting the Baptist, but you won't know the joy of the Savior's birth or the joy of your own rebirth. Amen.

Sources

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