

December 4, 2016
Second Sunday of Advent
Matthew 3:1-12
The Rev. Carenda Baker

We have a bit of a trek to make this morning as we continue on our Advent journey. We are going out into the wilderness, so we will need some traveling music. The traveling music goes like this: ***“Prepare the way of the Lord, prepare the way of the Lord, and all people will see the salvation of our God.”*** (congregation repeats the Taize chant several times after the preacher first sings it).

Why have we come out here to the wilderness around the Jordan? We have come to meet the prophet John, whose work is preparing the way of the Lord. The people of John’s day came because they were spiritually seeking. This is rather unusual though. Here they are - crowds of people coming out from the city to see him, from Jerusalem, the surrounding area of Judea, all around the Jordan. They are coming from the place that is the hub, the busy, bustling, buzzing center of political, social, and religious life. Folks are leaving their homes and coming into the wilderness to meet this man John, this man who is unconventional to say the least. He marches to the sound of his own drum, which is actually the heartbeat of God’s love and justice. John lives out there on the margins, in the wilderness, looking and sounding every bit the part of the wild prophet. He’s wearing a camel hair shirt, and he eats the food of the very poor, of those who live on the margins. He eats what he finds there in the wilderness, locusts and wild honey. And there John stands, knee-deep in the Jordan River.

So what is John doing out here to prepare the way of the Lord? Well, he’s doing what prophets do – he’s preaching by truth-telling about the here and now, the present time. Prophets deliver judgment and hope, speaking on behalf of God. And there by the Jordan John is hearing confessions and baptizing those who come and want to renew their lives, who know they need to take a different direction.

John’s sermon is brief and pointed: ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*** We can depend on John to give us the same sermon every Advent – ***“Repent!”*** ***“Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”***

If we’re honest, this is not really the kind of sermon we want or look forward to hearing during Advent, or really any other time for that matter. When we first hear John’s preaching, it seems like he must be the original Grinch come to steal our Christmas. But that is far off the gospel mark!

John’s aim is not to steal our comfort and joy, or the gifts and makings of the Christmas feast. John’s task is to lead us to experience MORE – more grace and mercy, more

forgiveness and healing love, more peace and justice, more simplicity, purpose, and wholeness. John knows that God has a vision for the whole world that is far beyond our wildest human imaginings. John's job is to help get us looking in the right direction, and then to turn and go in that new direction – the direction God's dream is pointing.

[Here the preacher again sings the chant – “Prepare the way of the Lord”. . .].

So here is what John says we need to do: confess, repent, be baptized, and bear fruit worthy of repentance. We've heard that confession is good for the soul. I hope you have experienced, and continue to experience this to be true. Yes, it's hard to take off our masks, to expose our secrets. Yes, it takes courage to be honest, real and vulnerable. Yes, it's hard to lay aside our rationalizations and our ego-protecting pretenses to admit that in one way or another we have been going the wrong direction, straying away from God's love. Advent is an ideal time to do the work of getting real with God. This is exactly what our practice of the Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent in the Book of Common Prayer is for, to help us with the confessing and repenting, being reconciled with God, and then turning and setting our direction once again toward God. The rite is about release, restoration, and renewal – that is, freedom.

Repentance is not about being guilt-laden, hanging our heads and muttering we are sorry for being such bad people who are always missing the mark, failing at our own self-improvement project. Repentance is about turning in trust and hope toward the God of abundance – the God of endless love and mercy, of healing and new life, of peace and freedom. Confession and repentance are acts of spiritual maturity. And they are necessary for growth in our relationship with God. Repentance is about lining up our talk and our walk, asking God to help us live what we say we believe. Confession and repentance is about taking responsibility for our actions.

Baptism was for the people in John's day a sign of repentance – a ritual enacting the decision to get back on track and go in the direction of God's leading. The baptism that Jesus would bring as John described, would be not just baptism with water, but a baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Fire burns. Fire is about being made pure and holy. The biblical and theological word is “sanctified”. This is the ongoing work of being shaped more and more into the image of Christ, so that we will want to, and will choose more consistently to go in the direction of God's leading, toward love and justice.

If you're not sure what repentance might look like, here are a few possibilities to consider.

If you are alienated from somebody, begin talking, get started on being reconciled.

If you think yourself morally better in behavior, materially better in wealth, more gifted in intellect and talent than others – focus on practicing humility and gratitude.

If you have been uncaring and unconcerned about the poor, try to imagine what it's like to live with no home, food, job, or transportation.

If you think that physical force in personal relationships and military force among nations is the only way to bring about peace and order, now is the time to be praying for wisdom and start practicing being a peacemaker at home with your family and friends, in the community, on the highway, at work and at church.

If you have put your trust in the accumulation of possessions so that you find yourself a slave to a whole host of masters, now is the time to unload some of that stuff, to check this year's spending and put your trust in God.

As Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor has said: "If any of us have assumed to this point that we are going to be judged on our ability to avoid evil in this life, Advent is a time for us to hear that we are going to be judged on our *courage to do the good.*"

So today, the invitation before us is now to take a moment to ask ourselves - What is God's dream for me? What does God want me to be and to do? As you consider this question about God's dream for you, choose just one thing – 1 habit, 1 relationship, 1 area in your use of time, talent, or treasure – select one area where you need to change direction. Then claim this Advent season as a time to do that, to repent, to change and go a new direction toward deeper love of God and neighbor.

Thank God for Isaiah, John the Baptist, and all the prophets of Scripture, and for prophets in our day who remind us that God comes to us daily with that holy dream in hand. God waits and longs for us to turn and take the next step toward joining God in the work of healing and reconciliation, the work of the Holy One who has come. With great expectation, God is hoping and trusting that we will bear fruit worthy of repentance. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

[Preacher concludes with the chant -"Prepare the way of the Lord, prepare the way of the Lord, and all people will see the salvation of our God."]