

**Second Sunday of Advent – Year A
9 December 2007
St. Anne’s Episcopal Church
Lee’s Summit, Missouri**

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love.
AMEN.*

Matthew 3:1-12

Well, it’s the Second Sunday of Advent, so it must be John the Baptist. It’s the same each year, as the Church celebrates the season of Advent – this season of waiting and preparation and anticipation.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all bring John the Baptist onto the stage early in their gospels – their stories of the Good News of Christ. But, each portrays John a bit differently. Some a little more refined and some a little less refined than others. Some a little more outrageous and some a little less outrageous.

Here in Matthew’s Gospel, however, we get the full-bore, all-out John the Baptist that is probably the picture you have in your mind’s eye when you think of this one who pointed the way to Jesus as the Messiah. Preaching out in the wilderness near the Jordan River, wearing a leather belt and clothing made from camel’s hair, reminding us of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. A very strange diet of locusts and wild honey. Shouting about a brood of vipers, axes chopping down unproductive trees, winnowing forks, and unquenchable fire.

In the Fall of 2006, I was taking a seminary class titled “Preaching the Difficult Texts of the Bible.” During our discussion one afternoon, the topic of John the Baptist came up, and our professor – Roger Paynter, who many of you met at my installation service - said, “In Advent, John the Baptist is like a guard dog, standing between us and Christmas.”

Something in that line really got my attention, it convicted me. Because you see, I realized that I didn't feel very comfortable with John the Baptist. And, it wasn't because of the funny clothes or strange diet or outrageous behavior.

I didn't feel altogether comfortable with John the Baptist because of the issue that is central to who John the Baptist is. It's that word, "repentance."

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Repentance. And, if you talk about repentance, you have to talk about sin. And, those are tough topics. Especially, when all the rest of the world is red and green. Brightly colored lights, Christmas trees, sparkling packages, and happy Christmas carols.

That's why John the Baptist can look like the guard dog that stands between us and Christmas. Repentance and sin are those tough topics that I don't feel altogether comfortable with. And, maybe you don't feel altogether comfortable with them either.

But, repentance and sin are those tough topics that our lectionary forces us to face, if we are to get to Christmas.

Repentance is the translation of the Greek word *metanoia* in the original text. It implies a turning around. Literally, it means "a change of mind."

But, repentance, a change of mind, can mean different things to different people; it can have different motivations and different sources.

Some people, for instance, think of repentance – a change of mind - as something that just naturally happens to people as they move along the journey of life. We travel along, our goals and expectations are

established, our values are set, everything is going pretty well, and we are moving smoothly down life's path...then, suddenly and unexpectedly - BAM!

Someone we love dies, we are given bad news by a physician, a relationship that we counted on ends and we are disappointed by someone we trusted, we lose a job, or we don't get into the college or university that we had our heart and mind set on. We crash into a wall of experience that we didn't choose and for which we are unprepared. We are not sure that we have the resources to help us handle what has happened to us.

All of us have had these things happen... and when they do, we have to make some changes. We must revise our goals, modify our expectations, reformulate our values, and find new ways to make decisions and to cope with what life puts before us. It's a process of turning about, a change of mind, a sort of repentance.

But, really, it's only a mild form of repentance. It's more a form of growth and maturation. We make some adjustments in how we think and act and approach life, but we do not fundamentally change. I don't think this is the kind of repentance that John proclaimed in the wilderness near the Jordan River.

For others, repentance can be a sort of theological version of a New Year's resolution or turning over a new leaf. As the old year passes to the new, our clothes may get a little tighter as we feel the extra inches around our waists, and we vow to change our ways. To eat better and less and to exercise more. Or, we think of the hurtful ways we have treated those we love, and we vow to change. To think before we speak in spite and to say more affirming and affectionate words.

In its deepest forms, these theological resolutions to change can be profound and dramatic. Among Christians in the church, we often celebrate this kind of repentance.

One of our most beloved hymns describes such a profound and dramatic change. “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost and now am found. Was blind but now I see!” The author of these words was John Newton.

A slave ship captain who had trafficked in human cargo. After he was converted and became a Christian, he left the slave trade, sought ordination, and became a priest in the Anglican Church. And, this former slave ship captain became a powerful, motivating influence on those who ultimately worked to abolish slavery in Great Britain.

While this kind of repentance comes closer to John’s message, I still do not think it was the kind of repentance that John proclaimed in the wilderness near the Jordan River.

The repentance that John proclaimed was not a mid-course correction or adjustment on the path of life. It was more radical than that. The repentance that John proclaimed was not a repudiation or negation of the past, a call to leave behind the wrong we have done in the past and set out on a new direction in life. It was more complex than that.

John did not call for people to modify or deny their past. John called for people to reclaim their past and then to use the past as a lens for seeing and moving into the future.

I don’t think it was a coincidence that John’s ministry was located in the wilderness near the Jordan River. This was the territory through which the people of Israel had wandered on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. It was a place of testing, where the people had been challenged to rely on God for sustenance and the place from which this band of wanderers was born as a new people, chosen and precious to God.

During the bleak days when the people of Israel were captive, living in exile and poverty in a strange land, the Prophets had held out a hope.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots

Messiah would come and God would act decisively to establish a rule of justice and peace over the whole earth.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

And, now John, standing in the line of Prophets before him, calls to Israel. He announces that the Jewish community, even at home, has been so disobedient to God's laws that they have lost who they are. They have lost their very identity as God's people. They have compromised who they are and negotiated how they will be faithful to God's laws under the occupation of the pagan Roman Empire.

They may think they can depend on having Abraham as their ancestor to save them, but they have lost touch with the very God who Abraham worshipped, the one with whom Abraham made covenant. This one who is able to raise up children to Abraham from stones.

Now, it is time to come back into the Promised Land, through the waters of the Jordan once again, confessing their sins...all their disobedience and unrighteousness...and then being cleansed and forgiven.

Not a mid-course adjustment in how their lives were going. Not a repudiation or a forsaking of their past. But, rather reclaiming of their past, so they could use it to see their true identity and to move as God's people into the future.

John the Baptist may at first look like a guard dog because in him we must face those things that we would probably just as soon not face. But, if we can listen to what he is saying, we recognize that he is not barking, growling, and snapping at us, but rather he is inviting us to have a change of mind, to turn around and come back...

to repent of those places where we have been disobedient and complicit with the world,

to reclaim who we are and whose we are in a real way and not just to rely on the fact that we bear the name Christian,

and to move on to celebrate Christ's coming to be among us in the incarnation and to wait for his coming in glory at the last day.

John invites us...

Repent! Go to Jordan and enter the Promised Land again, cleansed, forgiven, and renewed. Reaffirm your covenant with God, with all its demands and all its blessings. Messiah will come! The kingdom of heaven is at hand!

What will we do with John's invitation to us?