

Advent 2A 2016 Sermon

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."

"Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him..."

Here's my question: Why in the world did such a hoard of people leave the comfort of their homes and rush out into the wilderness to John the Baptist, when John was preaching a message of repentance? Would you and I flock to the corner of Main Street and Ninth if we heard that there was a preacher there on a soap box shouting "**REPENT!**"? Somehow, I don't think so.

And yet John the Baptist's call to repentance is a message we **all** *desperately* need to hear, to which we need to respond.

I think part of our problem with understanding the attraction of John's message of repentance is that the word "repent" has been hijacked over the centuries by preachers whose message of repentance is nothing but a *threat* of eternal damnation when we die: "Repent, **or else** you're going straight to hell!" But what is very clear in today's Gospel is that at the heart of John the Baptist's message of repentance is **not** a *threat*, but a promise; and it is not a promise reserved for when we die, it is a promise for here and now: "Repent, *for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Or as *The Message* translation reads: "Change your life. God's kingdom is here."

Somehow, my friends, you and I have to recover the true meaning of repentance, or we are never going to enter the fullness of the kingdom of heaven which is at hand, here and now.

We can begin by acknowledging that the Biblical word for repentance, “metanoia,” carries none of the negative connotations which the word “repentance” has accumulated in Western Christianity in recent centuries. The word “metanoia” comes from two Greek root words, “meta” (to change) and “nous” (one’s way of thinking or perceiving). Repentance is changing one’s way of thinking or perceiving. Fr. Thomas Keating states that to repent means “to change the direction in which we are looking for happiness.”¹ Many modern scholars, knowing the *baggage* that the word “repentance” carries today, substitute the phrase “conversion of life,” with the understanding that this entails both a change in mindset and behavior, and that both human effort *and* divine grace are involved in this process of conversion. One modern Bible translation of today’s passage replaces the word “repentance” in this way: “Turn to God and change the way you think and act” (God’s Word); and another reads, “Change your hearts and lives” (New Century Version).”

“But, Mark,” you may be saying to yourself, “I don’t *want* to change my heart and life; I’m perfectly **happy** with my life. I’m a good person, and while I know I have my faults, ‘changing the way I think and act’ is a little drastic, isn’t it?” I suspect our President-elect expressed what many of us Americans believe then he said, “Why do I have to repent, why do I have to ask for forgiveness if I am not making mistakes?”²

But here’s the thing: We humans have an infinite capacity to deceive ourselves. That is not a cynical view of humanity; it is simply fact, affirmed not only by psychologists and theologians, but business leaders, also. Tony Schwartz, author of several books on business, including *Trump, the Art of the Deal*, wrote this in a 2011 article in *Business Insider*:

“Each of us shares an infinite capacity for self-deception. What we fail to see - or willfully *resist* seeing - **runs** us, *outside* our awareness. What we’re *willing* to see, however painful it may be, we have the potential to influence. This [capacity for self-deception] is clear in the economic crisis we’re in [this was in 2011] and the stories that some of its most egregious players had to tell themselves to rationalize the choices they were making.

“What explanation did Bernie Madoff come up with to justify systematically defrauding thousands of clients, including friends and philanthropies, out of billions of dollars over many decades?”

“...What could have made John Thain, the ousted CEO of Merrill Lynch, feel it was **reasonable** to spend \$1.3 million decorating his office and then seek a \$10 million bonus during a year that his company was reporting billion dollar quarterly losses? (You and I could add more recent examples: Wells Fargo account managers setting up false accounts for literally millions of their customers; Volkswagen engineers programming cars in order to falsify emissions tests, etc.)

“These were... very shrewd, very successful men,” Schwarz continues, “who behaved in ways that were stupendously stupid, tone-deaf, self-defeating, and devastating to others.

“What I believe they were missing, above all,” Schwartz concludes, “were active inner lives. The antidote to self-deception is self-awareness. Among the thousands of senior corporate executives I’ve met and worked with over the years, no single quality is more conspicuously absent, or less actively valued [than their own inner lives].”³

I wonder if you and I are all that different? For we, too, seem to have an infinite capacity to live out our lives in ways that are contrary to the very Bible principles we profess. We somehow justify not forgiving someone, even though Jesus’ teaching on forgiving 70 X 7 is crystal clear (Matt. 18:22). We somehow justify not welcoming the thousands of people fleeing war and terror, despite the consistent injunction in both Old and New Testaments to welcome the stranger.⁸ We somehow justify hating our enemies, even though Jesus commands us to love them and pray for them (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35). We don’t see the homeless in our midst, or those who cannot afford to feed their kids or wash their clothes, even though they are all around us, and the Bible tells us to care for such as these.⁹ We speak against abortion because life is sacred, and yet we defend capital punishment and other forms of violence against sacred human life, and we incarcerate more of these sacred human lives than any other nation on earth – rarely, if ever, visiting those prisoners, as Jesus teaches us to do (Matt. 25:36, 39, 43-44).

We are, in the words of Richard Rohr, “a mass of contradictions.” And *this* is what John the Baptist addresses, head on.

“John the Baptist does not allow deception,” Fr. John Shea notes. “He is searingly honest. This unflinching honesty is a core component of repentance.”⁴

And this, I am convinced, is the *attraction* of John’s preaching: his unflinching honesty. For there is, deep within us, in our God-given DNA, a sense of what is true and real, and we **yearn** to get in touch with that and draw life from that God-created place! We are tired of living self-deceptive lives, where our ego self, our

false self, our shadow self – however you want to name it – calls the shots. I can testify to this in my own life. In what I can only call my “conversion experience,” my ego was hit with a howitzer back in 1975, and I was forced to face a painful truth about myself. At that very moment I was flooded with the Holy Spirit, unable to speak. I chose as a spiritual mentor a woman who has the uncanny ability to see through me and expose my self-deceptions, leading me toward the light of truth. I still struggle with self-deception each and every day.

And none of this is without pain, of course! Letting go of our ego self, our false self, facing our shadow, is always like a little death; but on the other side is the Real and the True, for which we all have a deep, God-given hunger.

This, then, is the primary task of repentance: to face our self-deceptions and distorted ways of seeing the world, ourselves, and others, and ask God that we might see through the clear eyes of Christ, and change our mindset so that we might have the mind of Christ. “[T]he kingdom of heaven is at hand,” writes Fr. John Shea, “but only the repentant will see it and reach for it.”⁵

Later in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus will name the sin of the Pharisees and Sadducees as “polishing the outside of the cup without dealing with the grime inside.” John the Baptist makes the same accusation: “You brood of vipers!,” John scolds. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” “The nature of their [viper’s] poison is externalism,” notes Fr. Shea. “They are afraid of divine punishment. So they will undergo John’s baptism as an insurance policy against divine wrath. They will comply ritually, but their hearts will remain untouched... John’s [message to them and to us is], ‘Get serious. This is about **real** change.’”⁶ Change of mind, change of behavior; conversion of life.

The Pharisees and Sadducees deceive themselves, thinking that being blood descendants of Abraham somehow allows them to avoid having to truly change. To that, John’s message is clear: “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” What would be the parallel claim you and I might make today? Instead of, “I have Abraham as my father,” perhaps we would say, “I’ve been baptized and Confirmed.” “I go to church every Sunday.” “I read my Bible and pray every day.” “I gave my life to Jesus back in 1975.” “I’m a good person; I’ve never run afoul of the law.” All of these are good things, of course; but we can too easily use them to avoid having to go deep inside and open our lives to God’s transformation.

In our Centering Prayer groups recently, we have been learning about an ancient tool for spiritual growth and transformation called the Enneagram, which describes nine different ways that humans view the world and interact with it and with God. One of the great benefits of learning the Enneagram is having our flaws, sins, and weaknesses brought to light, so that we can see what is blocking our path to wholeness in God. In short, the Enneagram is one tool for repentance,

a guide for our journey toward conversion of life, toward a fuller, more genuine relationship with God, others, and ourselves.⁷

And in the end, I think this is why people leave the comfort of their current lives and journey into the desert to hear John preach repentance: because they know that there is a way of life that **is** more real, more true, more honest, more rooted in the flow of God's Holy Spirit than the way of life they are currently living. And they *yearn* for it.

We yearn for it. It is our Advent longing. Oh, it will be painful, to be sure. All that language about the ax being laid to the root of the tree and fire burning away the chaff is very descriptive of how the lifelong journey of repentance, conversion of life, can sometimes feel. John the Baptist calls us to open our eyes and see the many ways that we are deceiving ourselves, see where we have been hurting others, where we have avoided growth in our lives, growth in God.

John calls us to repent, to change the direction in which we are looking for happiness. For if we are looking for happiness "out there," we will only satisfy the ego, while our hearts remain untouched. But if we repent, turn and look for our happiness in God, *Behold!* – the kingdom of heaven is at hand!

AMEN

¹ Thomas Keating, *The Mystery of Christ: The Liturgy as Spiritual Experience*, New York: Continuum Publishing, 2000, p. 5

² <http://www.christianpost.com/news/trump-why-do-i-have-to-repent-or-ask-for-forgiveness-if-i-am-not-making-mistakes-video-141856/>

³ <http://www.businessinsider.com/our-infinite-capacity-for-self-deception-2011-2>

⁴ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 32

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30-31

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33

⁷ For an excellent introduction to the Enneagram, see *The Road Back to You*, by Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016

⁸ **Some Bible passages about welcoming the stranger:**

- Deuteronomy 10: 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
- Leviticus 19:34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.
- Matthew 5:43-44 You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.

- Romans 13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
- Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.
- 3 John 1:5 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support such people, so that they may become co-workers with the truth.
- Hebrews 13:1 Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.
- Colossians 3:11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.
- Matthew 25:35 I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

⁹Some Bible passages about caring for the poor:

- Psalm 34:6 (ESV) “This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.”
- Proverbs 22:9 (ESV) “Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.”
- Proverbs 31:20 (ESV) “She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.”
- Daniel 4:27 (ESV) “Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed [poor], that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.”
- Matthew 19:21 (ESV) “Jesus said to him, ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’”
- Galatians 2:10 (ESV) “Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”
- James 2:5 (ESV) “Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?”