

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 3:1-12

pg 2 NT

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 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.'" 4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7 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? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 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. 10 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. 11 "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. 12 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."

This is the word of the word of the Lord

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 11:1-3, 6, 9-10 pg 640 OT

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;... 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. 10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

## “Joy in Repentance”

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near...Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” With these words, John the Baptist, cried in the wilderness, just as Isaiah prophesied nearly 7 centuries earlier. John, the cousin of Jesus, called people passionately to repent...to change direction, to turn around and face the way from which salvation comes and to do the hard work that is necessary to receive him. His words were and are a mixture of vinegar and fire. They do not capitulate or discriminate, and they are a little disarming. For many of us, frankly, they do not play well in this, “most wonderful time of the year” when we want everything to be “merry and bright”. They seem like a wet blanket on the joy of the season. But nevertheless, here they are, once again, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent. So, let’s today think a bit about them more deeply. Maybe we can come to the understand why they are here, why they’re so very important, and how the joy in repentance can be ours.

First, we need to affirm that this thing that God has done is radical. It is a radical thing that God in Jesus, entered into our lives and history as a vulnerable human baby. The One who we’d think should sit up in heaven, looking down at us, came to be with us and for us, taking on our messy lot and sharing with us what belongs to him...a new and abundant life forever, one that forgiven, and free. Yes, it’s radical. And it requires a radical response. It requires us to live a life consistent with God’s desire for us, a life of peace and equity for all creation, of mercy, compassion, justice and hope, a life motivated not out of fear, but out of gratitude. And it requires us to call into question our attitudes and behaviors which obstruct this response, to completely turn from what is causing us to get out of step, to begin afresh when we look in the mirror and do not see the person we know we should see. This is what John’s message is all about.

Rev. Jill Duffield describes it this way, *God’s greatest gift to humanity is about to be revealed once again, and if we are going to receive his fully, then we must let go of all the posturing, the metaphoric tinsel in which we, God’s people, wrap ourselves —status, piety,*

*wealth, righteousness—so that we may be ready to go down an entirely new path—his path--- the Way, the Truth and the Life.*<sup>1</sup>

Oh, how I like that. “*WE must let go of all the posturing*”... Yes, we cannot make any other changes in ourselves, let alone hear the directions forward if we are busy putting on airs. John calls us to see ourselves for who we really are. “*The true light that enlightens everyone is coming into the world,*” John says. If we are not honest enough to admit that there is a disconnect between who we think we are and who we actually are, then “our citizenship will be forever relegated to the brood of vipers, (the title John gives the Pharisee pretenders), and we will always be calling out others’ specks from behind the log of our own eyes.”<sup>2</sup>

I recently heard again a great story... *It began with a city traffic light. The light had turned green, and the car that was closest to the light didn’t move. The driver in the second car blew her horn; the man in the first car remained oblivious to the green light. The second driver blew her horn again; the first car didn’t move. The second driver began pounding the steering wheel; she screamed, cursed and, of course, the light turned yellow, and the man finally woke up, drove off, and left her to sit through still another red light. The driver was furious. She was pounding on her steering wheel again when she heard a tap on her window. She looked up to see a police officer, who ordered her to get out of the car. He handcuffed her, took her to the police station, fingerprinted her, and put her in a cell. Hours passed. Finally she was taken to the booking desk, where the officer who arrested her was waiting. “Lady,” he said, “I’m very sorry for the mistake, but I pulled up behind you while you were blowing your horn and cursing; I was noticing the bumper sticker on the right side of your car: ‘What would Jesus do?’ On the left bumper was that other bumper sticker: ‘Follow me to Sunday school.’ And then there was the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on your trunk. So naturally I assumed that you’d stolen the car!”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Duffield. “*Looking into the Lectionary: 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent*” in Presbyterian Outlook. <https://pres-outlook.org/?s=2nd+Sunday+of+ADvent> (accessed 12-01-16).

<sup>2</sup> Jill Duffield. “*Looking into the Lectionary*.”

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Adams. Sermon: “*Under Construction*”. <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons2003/120703.html>. (accessed 12-01-2016)

Yes, John the Baptist's call is for each of us to respond to the radical thing, to be moved for a place of posturing to a place of honesty and a desire to change attitudes and behaviors. For this we can be grateful, even joyful because recognizing our deep need for the saving love of Jesus Christ makes real all of the Christmas cheer, which would otherwise feel to us as fake.

*We must also let go of all the smugness.* William Sloan Coffin once said, *"The church is full of people who are seeking that which they have already found and who only want to become that which they already are."*<sup>4</sup> Yes. We in the church tend to think ourselves already in the know. We have much trouble repenting, making the drastic changes needed in ourselves because welllll, "we've heard it all before". The words ARE so familiar, it's hard to listen afresh. We might consider that they're for everyone else except us, and we sinfully, subconsciously think that "Repentance is something we do in the corporate prayer, but not in our own hearts." Regardless, we, Christians, often find ourselves tired, unmoved, plodding along with attitudes which hold us captive in ingratitude and self focus, unable to respond and unprepared for the joy of new life. This is especially noticeable at this time of year. We are unable to as the old hymn says, *receive Him still, and let the dear Christ enter in.*<sup>5</sup>

*A family including three boys was vacationing in France one Christmas, and not having a good time of it. For five wretched days everything has gone wrong," the father wrote in his journal. "Now that Christmas eve is here there is "no Christmas spirit in our hearts. Nothing to be grateful for. Besides, it is cold and raining." The family found a drab little restaurant shoddily decorated for the holiday in which to have dinner. As they entered, they noticed that only five tables were occupied, "two German couples, two French families, and an American sailor by himself. All of them were eating in stony silence, except for the angry exchange which occurred when the waiter brought the wrong meal to one customer. The restaurant's piano player listlessly played Christmas music." Suddenly they were interrupted by an "unpleasant blast of cold air." Through the door came an old flower woman. She wore a dripping, tattered overcoat and shuffled in on wet rundown shoes. She went from one table to another. "Flowers?*

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<sup>4</sup> William Sloan Coffin. In: Newscope Lecture series (July 1992) United Methodist Publishing House.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Brooks. <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/l/olittle.htm>

*Only one franc.” No one bought any. Wearily she sat down and ordered a bowl of soup. “I haven’t sold a flower all afternoon.” The piano player commented on her state saying, “not much of a Christmas feast, a bowl of soup. My tipping plate is empty, too.”*

*A moment later the sailor, who had been writing a letter as he ate, got up and walked over to the old flower woman. “Happy Christmas,” he gently said, as he pointed to two corsages. “How much are they?” Two francs, Monsieur,” she said. He handed the woman a 20 franc note. “I don’t have change.” The sailor leaned over and gave the woman a kiss and said, “This is my Christmas present to you.” One of the flowers he pressed flat and placed in his letter. The other one he presented to the mother of the three boys and left. A few minutes later Christmas exploded throughout the restaurant like a bomb The piano player began playing, “Good King Wenceslas”. The flower woman jumped up and began to dance. The Germans began singing in German; the French in French. The mother of the three boys put the flower she’d received in her hair. Everyone was smiling, big smiles, knowing smiles, as if they’d all remembered something wonderful, some secret sweet. All were seen to be nodding their heads when the last words of the hymn were sung, “Therefore, Christian men, be sure, Wealth or rank possessing. Ye, who now will bless the poor, Shall yourselves find blessing”. Eighteen people who had been having a miserable evening, due to the obstacles in their hearts and minds, obstacles distancing them from God’s love and from the hopeful message and purpose born out for all humankind in Bethlehem so long ago, ended up having the happiest, the very best Christmas Eves that any of them had ever experienced.<sup>6</sup>*

Brothers and sisters, recognizing our need for repentance and then taking steps to change allows us to really receive the Christ who came and will one day come again. I invite you to go from here today dreaming something beyond what we can presently see. Dream like Isaiah did, about a place where there is no predator or prey, where “*the wolf will lay down with the lamb*”. Dream of a time where there is no fear or hatred, when “*the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*”. And once you dream it, then I invite you to set a course for it. Next, purge any posturing and smugness you may have in your heart and take the

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Lederer. “*AGift from a Sailor.*” In: The Guideposts Christmas Treasury (Carmel, NY: Guideposts Magazine, 1997), 154-57.

courageous, hard steps to change what needs to be changed in you. Choose at least one thing in your life that is blocking you from the course you've dreamed. Let it be something that when corrected will move you to be more like the person God created you to be. Do you have an unhealthy relationship you are ignoring but yet need to address? Is there someone to whom you need apologize or to whom you simply need speak to clear things up? Is there an event in your business and professional life which you continually try to bury but yet resurfaces as guilt, regret, pain or anger? Is there some practice or habit or addiction that you seem not able to control, one that is keeping you from reflecting honesty, kindness, compassion and mercy?

If you can do this, friends, you will begin to experience an abundant, more authentic life. If you do these things, you will be responding to the radical gift that we've been given and the true blessings of Christmas will most certainly be yours. If you do this you will go a long way in straightening the path to your heart for Christ to enter in. This is the joy in repentance.

*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near...Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Amen.*