

First Presbyterian Church
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Repentance: It Is the Good News!

Luke 3:1-18

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

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

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him,

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin 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.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them,

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?”

He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectations, and all were questioning in their own hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying,

“I baptize you with water; but the one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with

the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing hook is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

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You brood of vipers!

What if that was the way your pastors greeted you on Sunday morning? What if, instead of starting worship with a smile and some announcements, we grabbed hold of the pulpit, peered over at you and said, “Welcome to First Presbyterian Church, you bunch of snakes!”

Would you come back? Would you invite your friends?
“Come hear our new preacher – he is full of good news!”

You have to wonder about John the Baptist. I mean what was his deal? He seems so angry. That’s no way for man of God to act!

You can bet that John the Baptist did not start his worship services with announcements – at least not the uplifting, informational type.

There was no “good morning!” There was no “welcome!” He just let it loose: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” You have to wonder about John the Baptist – he seems to need a lesson in tact. You can bet he was not raised in the South.

But before we dismiss John for his strong words, did you notice that there were crowds? You wouldn’t think there would be. You would expect to see John the Baptist standing on a street corner, thumping his Bible, hollering about the ax at the root of the tree and the unquenchable fire, while the rest of the world walked past and ignored him – but that isn’t what happened.

Scripture tells us that John was in the wilderness. What is interesting about that fact is that folks didn’t just stumble upon people in the wilderness. If you wanted to hear John, you had to make an effort to be there. You had to get up off your duff, strap on your sandals, and start walking. The gospel tells us that the crowds came to hear what John had to say; that there were – not a few people – but crowds who subjected themselves to hear words of judgment! So you have to think that something about John’s message was compelling. Compelling enough to pull those crowds of people away from their regular lives to come traipsing out in the wilderness to hear a difficult word: repentance.

John the Baptist called it good news.

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To “repent” means to turn around. To change. To do something different. Something better. More faithful. More purposeful.

Almost every year, during this Advent season in the life of the church, we encounter John the Baptist...this gnarly looking wild man who stands directly in between us and the babe in the manger. Almost every year, before we dive into presents and candlelight services and fruitcake, before we get to all of that...John the Baptist calls us to repent.

Now, let’s be clear. When John brings his message of repentance, he is not talking about your Republican friend, or your Democratic mother-in-law. He’s not talking about the person in your office who is skeptical of climate change. And he isn’t talking about the person in your Sunday school class who thinks Grover Norquist is a stand up guy, or the person in your Bible study who believes President Obama is being reasonable in his negotiations around the fiscal cliff. No. John’s message about repentance is not directed at someone else. When John is talking about repentance, he is talking about what it means for you. And for me.

The author Annie Dillard has a line that I love and often use when it comes time to call the church to confession. She says: “God loves us just the way we are – and too much to let us stay that way.”

God loves us just the way we are, and too much to let us stay that way.

What Dillard describes is repentance – and we all need it.

That’s nice, but still – God loving us just the way we are sounds a far cry from John’s words about broods of vipers and axes and burning chaff and unquenchable fire. And maybe that should tell us something about how casually we understand God’s love. For, I think, in our overly therapeutic and conflict-avoidance kind of way – our culture has sterilized God’s love to be free from demands or expectations, even, the possibility that God could be angry with us¹.

Now, to be sure, there are churches and preachers who drone on about an angry God so often that they hurt those to whom they were supposed to minister. Maybe you have been hurt in this way. If so, I am sorry. But that is not the kind of anger I am talking about.

¹ For more on this subject, I recommend reading the book *Almost Christian* by Kenda Creasy Dean. Dean references the work of Christian Smith, a sociologist from Notre Dame, who describes the prevailing spirituality of teenagers (and their parents) as “Moral Therapeutic Deism.”

When I talk about God's anger, I think more about the kind of anger described in a story I heard from Lindsey's uncle – a pastor in Kansas City.

Tom talks about grandparents.

You know how a grandparent can make you feel like you are the only person in the room. They shower you with love that you don't deserve; make such a big deal out of just getting a chance to see you. You pull up at their house after having not seen them for a few months and they run out of the door and throw open their arms and say,

“Get over here and come give me a hug! Just, get over here!”

A grandparent's love is a lot like God's – available, warm, and without qualification.

Yet Tom tells a story of a time he and his brother were staying with his grandmother. On about the second day of their visit, Tom's little brother was giving him a hard time, and so Tom did the only thing he could think to do at the moment – he hit him.

As the blow landed on his little brother, Tom's grandmother stopped what she was doing, looked at him with a level gaze, and then, in a voice that sent chills down his spine, said – “If I ever see you do that again, *I will skin you alive!*”

Tom remembers she said it in such a way that would make John the Baptist feel insecure.²

God loves us just the way are – and too much to let us stay that way.

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I don't claim that it is easy for us to identify those parts of ourselves that are most in need of repentance. To repent is to acknowledge that who we are, or what we have done, is outside of God's good design for our lives.

Admitting that is difficult because most of us like our lives: we have worked hard for them and we don't take too kindly to change. And deeper than that, I suspect that most of us would admit that repentance is difficult because God's claim on our lives and God's will for our lives is in fact in stiff competition with our own desires and our own designs for our lives.

Yet what makes the kind of repentance that John the Baptist is preaching about so important is that without it, we cannot experience the fullness of God's gift to us that we wait for this Advent and Christmas season in Jesus Christ.

² This story – which surely is reminiscent of a lot of our stories – is one that I heard from the Rev. Tom Are, Jr. (Senior Pastor, Village Presbyterian Church) at the Montreat Youth Conference (“World on Fire” 2009). Tom's sermon at Montreat left an indelible impression on me – and helped me interpret this scripture for proclamation.

That is not a threat – it is a reality. God loves us just the way that we are. That doesn't change – even if we refuse to change. Yet the message from the manger – and from the cross – is that God wants us to be more. You see, the manger – and the cross – are not necessary if things are fine just the way that they are. We fail to experience and appreciate the love of God in Jesus Christ if we fail to repent of the things that separate us from the kind of life that God wants for us.

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Scanning the headlines this week, there is news about the threat of chemical weapons being used on civilians in Syria. There is continued unrest and violence in Egypt. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, home to our missionaries – Larry and Inge Streshly who were with us a few weeks ago – a rebel insurgency continues to tear the delicate fabric of government and order as well as involve more children in the stain of war.

There are many other examples from the world in which we live; examples of communities, lives, and dreams wrecked by violence or greed or racism or apathy...even in our own backyard. Even in our own homes.

So here is the good news: God does not want things to remain this way. The fact that God calls us to repent – demands that we repent – not in a calm, soothing kind of way, but through a ferocity that bespeaks of love – is good news because it assures us that God has not given up on us nor on our world.

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The wilderness preacher John talks about repentance as a process of purification: cutting away that which does not produce fruit; beating the threshing floor to separate the grain from the worthless chaff; burning that chaff in a fire that renders it history.

That kind of talk about repentance may sound scary, it may sound difficult – and make no mistake...it is: but it is a reflection of how much God loves us that he will not leave us alone.

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It is Advent. A time of preparation. A time of introspection. As we wait for the coming of the Lord.

I recognize that you and I may not be ready to think about what in our lives that needs changing, what priorities need some re-shifting, what deeds demand repentance,
but when you are ready –

When you are ready for the way you invest your money and time to be more about the healing of the world;
when you are ready for your friendships to move beyond pleasantries to a more profound relationship;
when you are ready for your marriage to come off auto-pilot;
when you are ready to face your addictions;
when you are ready to stop covering up your anxiety about the future with the things you buy;
when you are ready to move past the fear of your neighbors;
when you are ready to put aside the cynicism that prevents you from seeing the activity of God

When that time comes, the good news is that there is a prophet in the wilderness named John – and his message is compelling enough to call us out...out of our normal day to day, beyond our carefully constructed life...and to help us become more alive – more human – more like the kind of person that God created us to be.

God loves us just the way we are –
and too much to let us stay that way.

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