

“Bearing Fruit Worthy Of Repentance”

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.”

Bearing Fruit Worthy Of Repentance

Matthew 3:1-12

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I.

I will confess, when I sat down to write this sermon I felt within me feelings of nervousness bordering on anxiety. John the Baptist is my favorite of the biblical figures. I dig the whole camel hair coat thing and the leather belt, as well as the locusts and wild honey for food; a guy after my own heart.

Moreover, I appreciate his faith in honoring his call to ministry. As opposed to the Apostles, Disciples, and every other subsequent follower of Christ who unavoidably based their faith on the miracles Jesus enacted and the words Jesus spoke, not to mention his resurrection, John the Baptist had precious little on which to proceed: the prophecy of the Hebrew Scripture and an ache in his soul.

II.

Not only did John the Baptist *clear* the way for Christ as foretold by the prophets Isaiah (chapter 40) and Malachi (chapter 3), John the Baptist actually *created* the way, seemingly, out of whole cloth. Well, not entirely. You see, the practice of baptism was nothing new to first-century Judaism, In the book of Leviticus, God instructs Jews to cleanse themselves from ritual impurities, hence fulfilling the legal requirements of ritual purity so that Jews could sacrifice at the Temple. Further, the practice of baptism and the belief in the purifying properties of water was not at all uncommon to the pagan

religions of the ancient world: the Babylonians (spiritual cleansing), Egyptians (purification), Greeks (initiation) and the Phrygians in ancient Turkey (physical vitality).

III.

But, while the *practice* of Baptism had certainly been around for awhile, John's *purpose* for baptism was an absolutely new and novel approach: a call to repentance for the forgiveness of sin, because the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Over the near 28 year span of my ministry among you I have counseled you many times about the correct understanding of repentance. I will do so, again, this morning. The notion of repentance is *foundational* to our faith; it is a mission critical fork in the road of the spiritual journey. If one understands repentance as remorse or feelings of guiltiness, the faith that follows will be, correspondingly, shallow, ill-conceived & something of an easy jaunt. However, if one has a *proper* understanding of repentance, the faith that follows will be true, rich, but *infinitely* more difficult.

IV.

The word repentance, in the original Greek, is **metanoes** (meta - no - ess), to make a change, to turn from. From the root *metamorpho*: to transform. So, when John the Baptist appears in the wilderness of Judea saying, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near!" he *isn't* saying to get down on your knees and grovel, or feel badly about the things you've done or left undone. Instead, John's message is rather surprising: *Hey*, get up on your feet and get going. This thing is *happening*, now, and it is time for us to get prepared. And the way we prepare ourselves, is by making a change. Oooo, but *that's* a tough one, isn't it? It is so much easier to walk around bearing the weight of remorse and guilt than it is to make the changes that would free us from those burdens.

V.

As a veteran parent of three children I can tell you the hardest lesson one has to learn at any age, really, is to do the hard thing, today, in order to prepare the way for your best possible future. To many of us, I'm sure, this makes a great deal of sense; but only because we've learned this lesson through terrible trial and egregious error. We've learned:

That it is easier to tell the truth, all the time, than to live with the lie. That a stitch in time does, indeed, save nine. That we always do the right thing, simply because it is the right thing to do. That anything worth doing, is worth doing well. That the merit of all things lies in their difficulty. That we reap what we sow. That the tomorrow we seek is a function of the decisions we make today based on the wisdom of yesterday. That how we do anything is how we do everything.

VI.

Now, I confess, my affection for John the Baptist stems from the fact that his message makes sense to me. I have seen in my own life the virtue and benefit of making changes, of repenting. We should be clear, however, and this is where I start to get a little nervous, that John isn't calling us to repentance because it will make our lives *easier*, *save* us heart-ache, or because it is the *smart* bet. In fact, John's call to repentance, has absolutely nothing to do with *us* at all; it has only to do with *God*. For the Kingdom of Heaven has come near to *us*.

VII.

John the Baptist believed, with every bit of his heart and soul, that *someone* was coming; though he did not know who, and he did not know when. Someone far more powerful than him. Someone whose sandals he is unworthy to carry. Someone who would baptize not with water, but with fire and the spirit. Someone who will gather the wheat to the granary. Someone whose nearness would demand each person to make a choice to make a change. Or, to choose not to and be considered chaff.

You can see, now, while all this might make one a little nervous. More to the point, however, nervousness becomes anxiety when we realize that not only is someone coming to call the question, someone is coming to hold us accountable not just for the answer we will give, but, moreover, for the actions we will *take* and the fruit we will bear.

VIII.

Advent is a *wonderful* time of year. It stirs in us feelings of warmth, of good-will, of hope. We wait, we watch, we welcome. However, just as John the Baptist admonished the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to be

baptized in order to hedge their bets, we must admonish ourselves that the changes on display in us at Christmas, really mean very little if we aren't actually *bearing fruit worthy* of those changes. Faith is *not* theoretical or abstract, faith is the practical and concrete expression of our belief that *someone is coming*; though we now know the who, we still do not know the when. Faith is not just what we believe, faith is the action we take and the fruit we bear which, like John the Baptist, prepares the way for the one who is coming. Faith is not fear of the unquenchable fire, faith is getting up off our knees and on our feet, in order to bring, ever closer, the kingdom which has *already* come near. Amen.