

During the Season of Advent, these 4 weeks when we prepare for the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, we are always invited to hear from John the Baptist. John the Baptist is that strange character who appears from out of nowhere wearing the strange clothes and eating the strange diet.

Many assume that he is from the Jewish community called the Essenes that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls that we never read about in the Bible because they separated themselves from the known culture. We don't know that. We do know that he is described as coming onto the scene from out in the wilderness.

John the Baptist is a scary character for many of us modern day and sophisticated Christians. Because he comes yelling about broods of vipers and about how Jesus can raise up children from the stones. He calls out to his hearers to repent because the kingdom of God is at hand.

Hearing a man yelling a fiery sermon about repentance may scare some of us. Some of us may come from religious backgrounds where a preacher stood up in the front of the sanctuary and yelled at you for what he felt was your sinful behavior.

Maybe you have felt self-righteous Christians point a finger at you and describe to you how you needed to repent of something. Maybe you have felt that you have found a sanctuary here because you do not hear those words of harsh judgment cascading down upon you. Maybe you find a little bit more grace within this place than you have found in other places.

But John the Baptist does invite us to repent. But maybe we need to understand clearer what repentance means for us. Repentance is about re-orientation. Repentance is about re-orientation. Repentance is about choosing to take a different path than the path our lives may now be on. Repentance is about choosing a different path than the path our lives may now be on. And let me tell you, making substantial changes to long patterns are hard to do.

I went in this week for my yearly physical exam with my doctor. He asked me several questions. And once again I told him that I am doing a good job of exercising in the morning and eating pretty well and doing some stretching exercises.

But even with doing all of these good things for my body I still suffer back aches. And the reason I suffer back aches is because of my poor posture. I asked him about some options, we talked about physical therapy and we talked about chiropractors but he basically said to me, you have poor posture and you probably are not going to change. My doctor basically told me that I refuse to repent of my bad behavior.

John takes a different approach to our behavior. John says that we can change. And John says that changing our focus and direction is important.

William Muehl tells the story about one December afternoon when a group of parents stood in the lobby of a preschool waiting to claim their children after the last pre-Christmas class session. As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried in his or her hands the “surprise,” the brightly wrapped package on which the child had been working diligently on for weeks.

One small boy, trying to run, put on his coat, and wave to his parents, all at the same time, slipped and fell. The “surprise” flew from his grasp, landed on the floor and broke with an obvious ceramic crash. The child began to cry inconsolably.

His father, trying to minimize the incident and comfort the boy, patted his head and murmured, “Now, that’s all right son. It doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t matter at all.” I pause here and ask you what does this response communicate to the child? “It doesn’t matter.”

But the child's mother, somewhat wiser as mothers tend to be in these types of situations, swept the boy into her arms and said, "Oh, it does matter. It matters a great deal." And she wept with her son.

Now maybe we don't have big things to repent from. Maybe we haven't done anything that bad lately. Maybe we are living a pretty good and clean life. Maybe we are not. Maybe you are engaging in some pretty bad behaviors. But this morning I want to invite you to participate in a little exercise with me.

For a moment, think about what you have been focused on for the past couple of weeks. What has consumed your life? What have you been doing? What has been your attitude about these events?

Maybe you have been doing some shopping. Maybe you have been working really hard at your job. Maybe you have been working really hard at school. Maybe you have been really busy. Or maybe you have been really lazy.

Over the past couple of weeks, what has been your attitude about these events? Has it been dread? Has it been unfocused? Has it been scattered? Has your attitude been hostile in some way?

Now think about your next week or so? What are you anticipating this week being like for you? More of the same? Are you worried about how something is going to turn out? Are you stressed about something in front of you?

Are you worried that you have lots to do but you don't know how you are going to get it done? Are you dreading this coming week for some reason? What does it look like for you heading into Christmas on December 25th? What is your attitude as you look ahead?

Now I want to invite you to do some repentance. By repentance I mean some re-orienting. Imagine now what you hope the next few weeks to be like for your life. Imagine what you hope for this Christmas. What does your ideal Christmas look like? My ideal Christmas is probably different than yours. Imagine for a moment what your ideal Christmas looks like?

Who is there? What are you doing? Where are you? What are the smells? What are the sounds? What does your ideal Christmas look like? Your ideal Christmas may look very different than any Christmas you have ever experienced before. Or it may look like some Christmas you remember from way back in your past.

Now compare your Christmas ideal with what you have been doing over the past couple of weeks. Have the ways you have been acting over the past couple of weeks lead toward the Christmas you desire? How about your plans for the upcoming few weeks? Are your plans for the next few weeks going to lead you toward finding that hopeful Christmas that is deep down inside of you that you are scared to really dream?

But this morning I am going to invite you to repent. By repentance I mean I am going to invite you to re-orient your life not toward what you think Christmas will be like but instead to orient your life to what you hope Christmas will be like.

I think my doctor's expectations for me are far too short. I think I can change my posture and do what is necessary to help make that happen. I may fail. But I am going to work really hard to change my posture so that I have no more back issues. I am going to commit myself to repent of my bad behavior.

But I invite all of us to keep alive our hopes for Christmas this year. Now that you have that hope in your head, what are you going to need to change this week so that your Christmas hope can become a reality?

Are you going to have to change an attitude? Are you going to have to change a behavior? Are you going to have to change who you hang out with? Are you going to have to change how you are using your time?

Thursday marked the end of the life of Nelson Mandela. An incredible man imprisoned for 27 years under the injustice of Apartheid. But rather than come out bitter and ready to seek revenge, he came out of prison with a desire to seek reconciliation. Mandela credited the poem called "Invictus" and written by William Ernest Henley as pivotal in saving his life. I share a portion this morning.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank God
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

We can choose to repent and reorient our lives. Imagine the Christmas you hope for. And now begin doing the little things necessary today and over the next few weeks to keep that Christmas hope alive for you. AMEN.

+++++

-Muehl, William, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 82 and quoted by David Bartlett in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1.

-Text: Matthew 3: 1-12

-Given: Dec. 8th, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)