

Repent!

Isaiah 11:1-10

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.’”

Leave it to the church to ruin the Christmas season. Just when we are getting in the spirit by putting up a wreath, picking out a tree, addressing cards, and playing our Philadelphia Orchestra Glorious Sounds of Christmas CD, the lectionary gives us this: a crazy man in the wilderness calling people a name whose actual translation I can only repeat among my friends in Wednesday morning Bible study with whom I feel safe (what’s said in Bible Study stays in Bible Study!); the lectionary gives us this: a wild man threatening eternal judgment unless we begin to bear fruit. What is Advent about anyway?

In a word, John’s word, Advent is about repentance. It is a word that long ago dropped out of the vocabulary of even the most religious, so we need to begin this morning with a bit of homework. Look up repentance in the dictionary and you read that it is the act of expressing regret or remorse for wrongdoing or sin. In addition, Webster says darkly, see penitence, penitentiary. Early on, the church bought into this definition. Of the two words in Scripture that are rendered repentance in English, the Old Latin and Latin Vulgate favored one of those words. *Paenitentia*, see penitence, penance: prescribed prayers or acts designed to rid the soul and body of self-love. The problem with this first definition of repentance, from the perspective of our own theological tradition, is its secularity: repentance is something we can do to improve ourselves, albeit with the church’s imprimatur, but with no need of a redeemer.

To get at the biblical meaning and in the second place, we turn to the other word in Scripture translated as repentance. This is the word John the Baptist shouts in the wilderness: “*Metanoia!*” *Meta* meaning above and *nous* meaning mind. I think of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” *Meta-nous*. Here *metanoia* has something to do with dying to the old way of seeing and being reborn with eyes that see from above; that see everything through the eyes of the love that God is. Here repentance is not self-improvement but Godly-redemption.

And because our redeemer is about to be born in Bethlehem, we need not guess what it is to see in this way. He redeems our seeing at the beginning on a mountain in Matthew, where he fits us for the lens of love, a lens that refracts the light of the world until it shines from out of the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. All the way to the cross, we see, through his eyes of love, the leper made clean, the Centurion’s servant healed, the paralytic redeemed; we see the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute and the little children as wholly themselves. In other words, repenting, dying to our old way of seeing every other, we wake each morning to see even ourselves as Jesus sees us—our past forgiven at great cost and our future wide open to the destiny we were bound to refuse until we consented to die.

The last part of our homework has to do with repentance as a way of being in the world day by day. Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen, a priest and professor at Yale who spent the final decade of his life in community with the mentally disabled, contrasts *metanoia* with *paranoia*. *Meta*, you will remember, meaning *above* the mind and *para* meaning *beside* the mind. Paranoia is the self warily watching the self move through the world under the threat of both figurative and literal death. “The posture of paranoia,” Nouwen says, “is symbolized by a closed fist, a protective stance, by habitual suspicion and distrust. Paranoia has us feeling that we forever need to protect ourselves, that others will hurt us if we show any vulnerability, and that we need to assert our strength and talents to impress others. Paranoia quickly turns warmth into cold, understanding into suspicion and generosity into self-protection.

“The posture of *metanoia*,” by contrast, “is seen in Jesus on the cross...exposed and vulnerable, his arms spread in a gesture of embrace, and his hands open, with nails through them.” “I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from Tegel Prison to his friend Eberhard Bethge toward the end, “I discovered later and I’m still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith...living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes, failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing, we are throwing ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world....That, I think, is faith; that is *metanoia*.”

Paranoia and metanoia, Nouwen says, are two ways of being in the world. For Nouwen, repentance, metanoia has to do with the death of the self threatened by death, a redemptive death that is not ours to accomplish but Christ's in us, a death foreshadowed in Jesus' birth that sent John into the wilderness to prepare the way.

When the story of Herod's massacre of innocent baby boys in Jerusalem ends with news of Herod's death and the Holy Family's return to Nazareth, Matthew leaps ahead thirty years to the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness of Judea. Notice first where John does not appear: not in the city of present political and religious arrangements where you go to get things done and decided. Rather this late in time prophet appears on the margins, in the wilderness: the place of revelation and judgment in the Old Testament; the place of judgment and redemption in Matthew. Curiously, the people of Jerusalem and all Judea and the region along the Jordon leave the places of power to go out to him in the wilderness where the first word out of his mouth is "Repent!"

Repentance, *metanoia*, Advent begins in the wilderness. We must first leave the places and institutions and voices that have led us to believe we are masters of our fate and captains of our soul. Go out to the wilderness: go to the place where God first rescued God's people from bondage; go to the place where all the things you rely on to hold you in life are missing; go to the place where you must wait to be fed by bread enough for the day; go to the place of vulnerability where God is your only trust. This could be a late night alone by the fire with your own thoughts; but for the likes of us, the place of vulnerability more likely awaits us where the vulnerable actually dwell in this society: recovery meetings, soup kitchens, a mosque in the city, The Valley Youth House for homeless LGBT youth in the Gayborhood; awaits us with the youth of West Kensington, the elderly poor at Scottish Rite House in South Philadelphia, church basements at night among guests of Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network, in the Veterans Hospital. There in the wilderness, your old self, your closed mind, your well-defended heart will die as you see yourself seen through the vulnerable eyes of love; there God's kingdom will come toward you. "Repentance," Karl Barth insists, "is turning about to that which is nearest and which we always overlook, to the center of life which we always miss; to the simplest which is still too high and hard for us."

Going out to the wilderness is the first movement of *metanoia*. The second, John says, "Be baptized!" Be reborn from above. Those who came out were baptized by John in the river Jordan, confessing the distance they had lived from the God for whom they were made. The vast majority of us in this sanctuary have been baptized. Therefore in Advent to repent is to remember our baptism. Remember that once you died to life without God as the waters of baptism washed over your little head or dripped down your wrinkled face or drowned your whole body in a pool or a river. Remember your baptism. Remember that in these waters of grace you died to death's power over your life. Remember your baptism and see, through your reborn eyes of love, the light shining from out of the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted; see through his eyes the leper made clean, the Centurion's servant healed, the paralytic redeemed; see the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute and the little children as wholly themselves.

Finally to repent in Advent is to submit to judgment. We read that there were Pharisees and Sadducees among those in the wilderness that day. Here the translation is tricky because of a pesky little word—*epi*--that can mean the religious establishment was coming out *for* John's baptism or *against* it. Our translation gives them the benefit of the doubt, but John does not. He calls them something like a brood of vipers, snakes that literally eat their way out of their mother's womb. They stand for those whose way in the world is the way of paranoia, not metanoia.

John preached the gospel of God's judgment to these men which spelled the death of their old selves, their closed minds, their well-defended hearts. John preached good news, but you can guess, on the basis of the rest of Matthew's Gospel, they were having none of it. Some part of us also wants none of it either. "All human nature vigorously resists grace," Flannery O'Connor once said, "because grace changes us and change is painful." Still, ready or not, God's kingdom is coming near. In this season, therefore, our clenched hands must be unclenched and empty; our closed minds must be opened and waiting; our controlled lives must be shattered and set on the firm foundation of forgiveness. "He slays us so that he may make us alive," Barth says. "In no other way can God be spoken to us. In no other way can help be given us." In no other way can we receive the whole new life about to be born in Bethlehem.

What is Advent about anyway? Wreaths and trees and Christmas CDs? This season consider instead wilderness and baptism and judgment. Vulnerability and death and forgiveness. Leave it to the church to ready us for Christ's birth at the table he set the night before his death. Thanks be to God.