

Sermon for December 6, 2009
The Rev. John A. Baldwin

John Wesley once said, "Set yourself on fire, and people will come from miles around to see you burn." John the Baptist is a case in point. He was a man of passion, a man on fire with the Holy Spirit of God. People came from miles around to hear his words of power and persuasion.

We're not talking about a little afternoon outing here. To get from Jerusalem to the Jordan River where John was baptizing meant traveling down nearly 1000 feet in elevation through a dry and desolate mountain wilderness. Do you remember the story of the man rescued by the Good Samaritan who had been mugged by bandits? That happened on this very same road between Jerusalem and the Jordan. It could be a very dangerous journey, as well as a long and arduous one.

So what would entice people to make this excursion into the presence of a man reputed to be eating locusts and wild honey? They were a people thirsty for spiritual food.....even the Pharisees and Sadducees. John the Baptist must have rubbed his eyes in disbelief on seeing these upstanding citizens of Jerusalem hunkering down the banks of the Jordan and into the waters of baptism. The passion rumbled within him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Yes, John was a man on fire. He had a mission and a purpose....a clear vision and one with power. The people of Israel were hungry for the Messiah, the chosen one of God. John believed he was coming, and coming soon. "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." John's message was a call to repentance so that people would be ready for and receptive to the coming of Jesus, who would change forever the relationship between God and human beings.

There is something about a passionate person that both attracts us and repels us, fascinates us and frightens us. When someone speaks from the heart, and with conviction, we pay attention, because they may be onto something deep and profound that we too are looking for. Yet at the same time, they can deeply alarm us, because they all too often call us to change our attitudes, habits and settled ways in response.

John the Baptist's message is a call to change...radical change. "Repentturn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near." This too is a message of Advent. "Repent...our King and Savior is drawing near." "Be watchful, because you do not know the hour in which Jesus will come...suddenly or secretly, like a thief in the night."

For many people, repentance is what someone else ought to be doing. We sure wish our parents, our partners, our children, our boss, our neighbor, our clergy, those strong, often opinionated people in our liveswould repent and change. Then our lives would be so much better and easier to manage. Wouldn't that be wonderful!!! But what I've learned through many years of experience, and many hours of supervision and therapy, is that the only truly effective change is in your own heart and soul.

Repentance is more than just feeling sorry for something we've said or done. It's a reorientation of our lives. It means having the Lord God in the center of our being, rather than our own egos. That's what John the Baptist was talking about. Everyone needs repentance, because no one has yet arrived where Jesus did, living and breathing the pure, Holy Spirit of God. Repentance is not just for the other guy. It's for me. It's for us.

The prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and the rest) emphasized that man's relationship to God is personal, and that sin is rooted in a wrong relationship to God. Repentance is the reorientation of the entire person towards God. Genuine repentance leads to obedience, unqualified trust in God and a refusal to lean upon human help (alone). Repentance is the renewal of life; it demands a new heart and a new spirit. (Interpreter's Bible "Repentance").

Do you believe that you personally have no need for repentance in your life? Let me ask you this: How much peace and serenity is there in your life? Do you greet each morning with joy, thankfulness and eager anticipation, washed by the Holy Spirit of the care and fears of yesterday? How much brokenness and wounding is there within you? When someone does or says something you don't agree with, are you filled with anger and resentment? When you are up against serious challenges in your family, your work, your community, does anxiety kick into overdrive? Do you judge others by the color of their skin or the clothes they wear?

I know that I have a lot of room for repentance in my life. I often find myself judging others, without first trying to understand them. My inner wounds often block my ability to be fully attentive, compassionate and thoughtful to others. I find myself getting a little anxious every year about this time, as the response or lack of response to our Every Member Commitment campaign becomes clearer. God is too often absent from the center of my soul and being. His will is thwarted far too often by mine. How about you?

Repentance, the turning to God and away from sin, must begin in our hearts. Repentance is all about hearts of stone becoming hearts of flesh; hearts filled with ice melting with the heat of love and compassion; walls built around our hearts to protect us from pain becoming dismantled brick by brick as our trust in God replaces our fears and anxieties.

Like Sleeping Beauty, it takes Prince Charming (Jesus of Nazareth) to awaken our numbed spirits to life again. Like the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz, it takes the oil of the Holy Spirit to un-rust our atrophied limbs and set us on the road to the Emerald City in search of a heart. It takes Beauty (the pure love of God) to see through the Beast (our wounds and hurts) to the goodness and potential that lies within us. We love fairy tales like these because they tell the truth about us, and something inside us is still alive enough to know it. (The Transformation of the Inner Man, Paula and John Sandford p. 212)

That's why women and men for 2000 years have found their lives profoundly changed by the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Something inside us knows that in the life of Jesus we are getting a clear portrait of the personality of the God who created us, and the glory of the life of grace to which God is inviting us. Repentance is all about claiming that gift of new life, and turning away from those things that threaten to rob us of the love, grace and peace offered to all who truly love the Lord. Put on therefore, a new mind, a new heart, and a new Spirit; repent of those things that draw us away from the love of God, and believe and trust in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.