



The Way of the Prophet: Cry Out
Matthew 3:1-12
Rev. Jenny M. McDevitt
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John the Baptist. He lives in the wilderness and hollers about repenting, dressed in camel's hair and leather, eating locusts and honey. Scripture says nothing about his hair, but you just know it was a tangled mess. And even if I'm wrong about that — he talks about a world that's a tangled mess. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." And his message doesn't get any easier from there.

Some old friends from Kansas City stayed with me for a few days this past week. They took New York City by storm, from Broadway to Brooklyn and back again. I was able to join them for the Radio City Christmas Spectacular, which, even if choreographed dancing isn't your thing, you have to admit is pretty impressive. For 90 minutes, a cast of 150 tells some of the most beloved stories connected with Christmas. There are families and ice skaters, dancing bears and toy soldiers, sugar plum fairies and rag dolls, North Pole elves, reindeer, and, at one point, about a bajillion Santa Clauses. There's even Mary and Joseph, shepherds and magi, angels and sheep, donkeys and camel ... It's Christmas through and through, but you know who

doesn't grace the stage, not even once? John the Baptist.

I will give Radio City a pass, though, because they show us Christmas. And John the Baptist is the star of Advent.

If you are attending Rev. Beverly Bartlett's class on "Christmas in All Four Gospels" you might already know that only two of the four gospels, Matthew and Luke, tell us the traditional Christmas story. Mark and John take different approaches. That said, John the Baptist shows up in all of the Gospels. All four. No matter who is telling us the story, you have to go through John if you want to get to Jesus.

So even if he's not exactly camera-ready, John the Baptist is essential to the story.

The biggest part of our struggle, I think, is less what he looks like and more what he says. Had John attended seminary, he would have failed pastoral care. Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the most poetic preachers to ever step into a pulpit, calls John "the Doberman Pinscher of the Gospel." She calls him this, she says, "because he sinks his teeth into us, shakes our souls around, and refuses to let us go."

It is precisely for this reason that my friend the Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in

Chicago, has never cared very much for John and his edgy ways. But his year, she says, she's choosing to hear John's bellowing as an invitation rather than a threat.

Now, I'm not suggesting our Evangelism committee take to the streets yelling "Repent! Repent and come to Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church!" To borrow John's own metaphor, that would not bear good fruit, because in many church circles, and in many caricatures of churches, the message "repent" is tied to a sort of "turn or burn" theology that has done far more harm than good. Turn to God, or else? Friends, that is not the Good News of the Gospel.

But even if that sort of ultimatum was never in your tradition, you may have long understood "repent" to mean, basically, telling God that you are really, really sorry, and you will never do it — whatever "it" happens to be — you will never do it again. Or maybe you have long been a good Calvinist, and believe along with our Reformer that we are all worms, lower than dirt, and that we have little chance of getting any better.

To be fair, both of those approaches highlight the very real struggle of being human, and the very real need for confession, which shows up in liturgy each week. But I submit to you that the acknowledgement of our mistakes is only a small part of the big picture of repentance.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan wrote a book together a number of years ago called *The First Christmas*. In that book, they track the biblical history of repentance. And they point out that in the Old Testament, the verb for "repent" is shaped primarily by the Jewish experience of exile. To repent, in Jewish tradition, means to return from exile to the place of God's presence. To

repent, to return, is to follow the prepared way that leads out of our separation from God. The prophet Isaiah says it, and Matthew himself quotes it: "Prepare the way of the Lord!" Return back from estrangement back into the arms of the One who loves you and looks out for you.

That is why Matthew and the other Gospel writers are so quick to emphasize that John really is a wilderness man. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness, all part of the process of leaving oppression behind and experiencing liberation on the other side.

And so maybe, just maybe, "Repent" really is more of an invitation than a threat. What if what John is saying is more akin to "Repent! Come home! Walk into freedom from everything hurtful or harmful. Walk away from everything that holds humanity back from life as it ought to be."

The New Testament meaning of the word adds another nuance. The root of the Greek word for "repentance," *metanaeo*, means to "see differently," to "think differently." More literally, it means to go beyond the mind that you already have. None of which is easy, but all of which lead us to acting and living differently. In the New Testament, to repent is to change, but not just for the sake of change itself. We change, we repent, we live differently when we understand that our actions are out of step with God's plan and desire for all creation.

Scripture is overflowing with images of God's desire for creation, but perhaps nowhere more beautifully than in the words April / Timmy read earlier: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... the calf and the lion and the falling together, and a little child shall lead them ... they will not hurt or destroy."

There will be peace, deep and lasting peace. God desires that the world be a place where we consider each other with compassion and love, where all creation is filled with the shalom of God.

That desire is, I think, exactly what John means to convey with all of his over the top enthusiasm. As one scholar puts it, "If John the Baptist had only cried "Repent!" he would have been wasting his breath. People do not simply turn away from one way of life; they do so only when there is something deeper and truer to turn toward. John gives the reason for repenting when he does not stop there." The message is never just "Repent!" It is "Repent! For the kingdom of God has come near!" And for those of us who follow God in the way of Jesus, Jesus is what defines that new way of seeing, that new way of thinking, that way of returning home to God and God's great hope for the world.

Now, I know there is a lot that follows in our text this morning, including a that whole "brood of vipers" bit. But that part and what follows is directed at religious leaders, like me. There, he is most definitely confrontational. John and I will work that out on our own time. What we've been talking about today is the way he addresses the general crowds. It has always seemed strange to me that he yells "Repent!" and hordes of people all but run into the river to be baptized. "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," Matthew tells us. The way of God has never been to scare people into submission. It makes much more sense to me, however, if they understood what they were

hearing was an invitation into bigger, more beautiful living.

What if all those people in the river saw not madness, but a smile in his eyes? It's possible that the wild-haired, honey eating, camel hair wearing, edgy wilderness man is not yelling with the threat of gloom and doom, but with an equally intense tone of hope and summons. "It could be that John's call for repentance was based on a deep trust he had that God's goodness is always more powerful than any of our badness and that God's power to heal us and make us new is always stronger than our power to mess up or stay stuck."

If that is true, what does John's invitation to repentance mean to us today? If we really can't get to Jesus without going through John (and we can't!) how might we take his words seriously?

David Lose, a theologian at Luther Seminary in Minnesota, asks three questions of the church this week.¹ First, he says, take the time to daydream what God's vision might be for you. What do you think God wants you to be and do? And, Lose says, remember that a daydream is a purposeful word, because God invites us to dream of something beyond what we can currently see. It is not a goal to be achieved, but a dream by which to set a course. God does not ask us if we are there yet, but rather if we are headed in the right direction.

Second, in light of that daydream, choose one element of your life you would like to repent of. Choose one piece of life you wish to take advantage of the healing opportunity to change direction. Is there a relationship you'd like to restore? A habit you'd like to break? A practice you'd like to take up? Again, hear this call to repent said with the tone of invitation

¹ Technically, he first asked these questions in 2016, the last time this text was in the lectionary.
<https://www.davidlose.net/2016/11/advent-2-a-reclaiming-repentance/>

and possibility, and dedicate season of Advent as the time to do it.

And third, identify one element in our communal life that needs repentance and prayerfully discern how you might contribute to it. And by communal, I mean not just us as a church, but us as a community, a city, the larger life that everyone around us shares together. Is there a communal issue to which God is nudging you to direct your time and action to contribute to change? If you are unsure, consider our Open Table meal ministry or our Overnight Shelter program, or talk to me about food pantries that are being established to serve the college-aged population. I learned recently that staggering numbers of college students are running out of food toward the end of every month, before the next financial aid check arrives. There are countless other opportunities. Ask God if there is one way you might make a difference, one way you might see something you hadn't seen before, and work to make a better, holier, reality.

Your responses, of course, are between you and God. But I encourage you to take advantage of this set-apart season to ask them. God has a profound respect for human freedom. God never forces Godself on anyone, so make the intentional choice to open yourself up for God to move in your life.

"Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near," John preaches. He's not the most marketable, but he sure is essential. He's inviting you to come home and be the person God created you to be. And he believes you can do it.