



John the Baptist by Caravaggio

On this, the second Sunday in Advent, we have the appearance of this strange man, John, who was Baptizing people in the Jordan River. Who was John the Baptist? Well, we know he was a cousin of Jesus. His parents were the old priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who lived in the hill country of Judea. We know that John was foretold by Isaiah as he who would prepare the way of the Lord. (See Is.40.3) So John was consecrated; he was set apart for a Holy life. He lived by himself in the desert of Judea, and he Baptized people in the Jordan River.

We are told that this Baptism of John was a Baptism of Repentance. That was what he was constantly crying out to the people. John was always calling out from the banks of the Jordan to anyone who would listen, "Repent, repent because the King is comin'! Don't ya'll let him find you unprepared. Repent, repent before it's too late."

What John is really doing is to try and prepare the people for transformation into the image of God, the destiny for which you and I are truly intended. The description of this new state is what the passage from Isaiah you heard this morning is all about. It's what one of my clergy friends calls "not just God with us, but God in us." A common strain of theology in today's interpretation of the Gospel is sometimes called "Liberation Theology" or "The Social Gospel." With all due respect to its practitioners, my concern is that some people believe that moral activism and the Gospel of Jesus Christ are inter-changeable; so the elimination of poverty and oppression is for some the main focus of our faith. I, on the other hand, receive the good news of Jesus Christ as our reconciliation with our Creator God, which is a state of being far beyond the freedom from earthly want and suffering. So, folks like me and the Liberation Theologians don't always see eye-to-eye. But I will be the first clergy person to assure you that a truly Christian worldview must need include a commitment to a world which is morally and socially transformed. The full knowledge of the Lord that Isaiah describes as the state of his holy mountain (See Is.11:9) requires a profoundly transformed humanity. If we are to receive and proclaim the glory of the Lord which Paul describes as available to all in the Epistle from Romans (See Rom.15:5-7), surely this blessing is only available to a people who is truly changed from glory into glory. (See 2 Cor.3:18) For if we call ourselves a Christian nation, yet refuse to remedy the unrighteousness so often meted out to the most vulnerable of our land, don't we join the ranks of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the theological hypocrites of John's day?

That's why John is so furious with Pharisees and the Sadducees. These were the movers and the shakers in Judea, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, these Holy Lawyers and political bigshots. They were the power brokers in Jerusalem. And they had no real feeling of repentance for anything they'd done. Why, they were on the top of the heap, and they liked it just fine that way. Why should they change?

Oh, they would respect the form of religious worship. They understood only too well the need to appear religious. You see, for the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the big-time lawyers and big-shot priests of Jerusalem, going out to get baptized by John in the river, was their version of kissin' babies and drummin' up campaign contributions. They knew that somebody like John had been prophesied to come along. And they thought to themselves, "Well, if I want to maintain my cushy place in society, I'd better go out like all these other silly losers and go through the motions of getting dunked by this weird, hippy-holy man."

But John had been called by the Lord God to preach a Gospel of Repentance. And he is furious with these Pharisees and Sadducees, because they do **not** repent. Evidently, John had been given by God a kind of sight, the ability to see into the hearts of these fat-cat politicians, and boys howdie, what John saw in these false hearts made him madder than our cat when he gets a bath. Because these Pharisees and Sadducees, these hypocrites weren't repentant! They weren't the least bit sorry. They had no intention of turning over a new leaf. They weren't going to change their arrogant, spoiled life styles. They were just goin' through the motions, playin a game of religious dress-up. They weren't really repentant."

So, what does it mean to be repentant? If you repent of something, it means you want to change. It means that you recognize that you've done something, or said something that's hurt somebody, and maybe hurt yourself too, and maybe even hurt God. And when you recognize this wrong, and want to right it, there comes to you a sense of your guilt. That's an important step in the process of repentance, yes? Because you have to realize that you stand before a judge, the judge who sees everything you do, and hears everything you say, and knows everything you think. And a person who repents has a real desire to make amends; this person makes a sincere commitment to change his life. Because he recognizes he's done something wrong, maybe wronged someone in a bad and hurtful way, and he admits to himself, and to the injured party, and to God, that he is guilty. That's another part of repentance, isn't it, fessing up that you've done something wrong, and painful to others. No, a passing thought, a kind of nodding of your head isn't enough. You need to go to the person you've wronged and admit it, and ask their forgiveness. And you have to ask forgiveness of God. Because if you ask God to make it right, but don't admit your wrong, do you really think He's going to take you seriously? No, real repentance means recognizing you've done wrong, and then really admitting to it, and actively seeking forgiveness, and working to make amends.

Recognition, confession, seeking forgiveness, committing to an amended life; those four things, recognition, confession, seeking pardon, amendment of life; that's what's involved in true repentance. So, let me ask you in this penitential season of Advent. Have you been really repentant? Are you really seeking the mercy God so freely offers by being truly repenting in your life?

It's not particularly pleasant when you find yourself at the beginning of repenting for some big thing. And the unfortunate truth is that the path of profound repentance winds through a deep forest of guilt. That's really the only way to get to true forgiveness; you have to walk through this rather gloomy place called "guilt." And for the really big stuff, when you've badly hurt somebody, or grieved someone dear to you, you may even have to wander for a while through that really dark valley of shame. I want to talk for a moment about the difference between guilt and shame, because it's important to know them for what they are.

Guilt is actually a very constructive emotion. In repentance, guilt is what you feel when you recognize that something you've done is wrong, and may have caused someone else harm, and maybe even broken God's heart. Guilt is feeling genuine sorrow for something you did, or said, or thought. And from this emotion can spring the four steps in real repentance we talked about; recognition, confession, seeking forgiveness, and a commitment to make amends.

But, for the really big stuff, when you've wounded, and scarred someone in a particularly painful manner, shame may come into play. When you feel shame it is because you believe not only that you have done wrong, but that there is a part of you that *is* wrong. Guilt comes when we believe we have done wrong. Shame comes knocking on the door when we come to believe there is a part of us that *is* wrong.

And let me be clear here good people, all of us have parts of who we are that are crooked, or somewhat off-center. That's what original sin is all about. So, all of us have weaknesses and warts, all of us have something to be ashamed of.

But, there's a danger with shame. Because shame's like a rash. A little shame can be a good thing. A small patch of sun rash after a day at the beach, a small irritation on the skin of your arm or leg can remind you of the dangers of going without sun screen. And so we can take precautions in order not to be badly sunburned. But, if you focus too much on that little patch of rash, if you rub it, and scratch at it, and irritate it, it can spread over your whole body, it can take you over. And this is the nature of shame. A little shame can be a good thing, can spur us to make a needed change in our lives. But, be careful. Be careful. Because too much shame, and we end up feeling useless, and hopeless. Too much shame, and we end up giving up, we lock ourselves into a prison of self-depression and throw away the key. And then the pity party can really get rockin'.

A fellow named John Bradshaw, a leading voice in the recovery movement for the treatment of addiction, John Bradshaw puts the difference between guilt and shame something like this. "Guilt says 'I've *done* something wrong;' 'and shame says there *is* something wrong with me.' Then guilt concludes 'what I *did* was not good;' but shame counters 'I *am* no good.' Finally Guilt confesses 'I've *made* a mistake;' but shame whispers 'I *am* a mistake.'

Yes, guilt is an emotion that comes to us when we recognize our selfish, or prideful, or sinful behavior and repenting of it. And that certainly is a good thing, and is of The Lord. But too much shame, the kind that ends in hopelessness and self pity, no that is not of the Lord. That kind of shame comes from somewhere else entirely, a place we dare not go.

In preparing to preach on this passage from Matthew 3 this year, I was struck by the fact that the fire of heaven that is coming upon the earth in the person of Our Lord Jesus is, as prophesied by John, a flame which bursts upon believers and unbelievers alike. In the more tragic case it is a fire of condemnation which burns away the attributes of this mortal life and reveals them to be the fleeting trappings of earthly dalliance. But, for the believer that same fire burns away the impurities by the power of God's Spirit, and reveals in each of us the bright and shining spark of our union with Christ which is forged forever in the immortal soul. So the fire is coming. It just remains to decide how you will go out to meet it.

This morning, we have met John the Baptist, that strange man in the camel-colored garment who prepares us to receive the Lord of Heaven. And John's preparation for us is a message of repentance. To recognize those things in our lives which are in need of fixing, to confess them to each other and to the Lord, to ask each other and to ask God for forgiveness, and to commit ourselves to living an amended life, a life transformed by the Holy Spirit, a life bent on living for each other, and living for God. These things we must do, if we are truly to stand before the cradle this coming Christmas morning, and welcome into our hearts all the richness of the full blessing the Lord of infinite Love longs to give us. So, this Advent season, let us all make straight the way of the Lord.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

JWB+, 11-29-16