

Forerunner Of Our Faith

Matthew 3:1-12

December 5, 2010

I.

Repent! The kingdom of heaven has come near! How many preachers today would begin their sermons that way? Some would, but that style is becoming less common. And the danger is going to the other extreme of preaching the deceptive message of a one-size-fits-all faith.

And what would we think about a modern-day version of John the Baptist? The guy wore camel's hair and ate locusts. Yuk! He called some people a "brood of vipers," and said that those who did not live righteous lives would be cut down and thrown into the unquenchable fire.

Pretty serious stuff, isn't it? But some people might be irritated by that kind of language. It's not polite or respectful. And even we might think John could have been a little less confrontational.

But considering that John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin whose ministry was foretold in the Old Testament (Isa. 40:3), and whose role as a prophet was blessed by the angels (Lk. 1:13-16), we cannot ignore him. This is not an isolated story. It is repeated in all four Gospels with a consistent theme that big changes are on the way (Mk. 1:8, Lk. 3:1-6, Jn. 1:22-27).

Here's another way to look at this reading. Think back to August, 2005. Remember the day or two before Hurricane Katrina. People warned you of danger. They told you to stop what you were doing and get ready for what was coming. You had to change your plans.

John the Baptist's message was similar. He told people to stop what they were doing and warned of coming danger. Just as the voice on the radio told you to go to the literal high ground for safety, John's voice in the wilderness told people to seek the spiritual high ground for salvation.

Why did John do this? Scripture tells us he was preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus Christ. But what needed preparing? Certainly Jesus' teachings and miracles were going to speak for themselves. What could John the Baptist possibly add to the picture?

One answer is that he was called to baptize Jesus, which made baptism holy for all humanity for all time. And his message foreshadowed the beginning of God's kingdom with Christ's birth, as well as the fulfillment of that kingdom with Christ's coming again at the end of the age.

Scripture also tells us that repentance is essential to salvation offered in Jesus Christ. And John's promise that Jesus will baptize us in the Holy Spirit assures us of salvation as we accept that offer.

This means John's preaching and ministry must be taken seriously. He was more than an advance man or warm-up act. He was more than someone who just announced the main attraction. He was the last prophet before Jesus Christ, and we have had none since. So let's examine his two points in today's reading; repentance and baptism in the Holy Spirit.

II.

Why did John go about the wilderness of Judea calling people to repent and change their lives? The Bible does not suggest that Jews living in first century Palestine were notorious sinners. In fact, they probably were model citizens compared with the pagans surrounding them.

And what did John mean by repentance? I recall the story about the fellow who sent some money to the Internal Revenue Service with a letter that said, "I am sorry about cheating on my taxes. Please accept this check. If it doesn't make me feel better, I will pay you the rest."

That probably does not describe repentance. We might typically think that repentance is a sense of regret or sorrow for doing something wrong, or for failing to do something we should have done. The confession we will offer in a few minutes sounds something like that.

John the Baptist, however, had a broader view of our need for transformation. He also called people to repent from things that interfered with their relationship with God. John proclaimed the need to come to faith as well as to depart from sin.

And he also believed repentance is an action, not just a feeling. It means changing direction and doing something different, not just being remorseful. Repentance, according to John, requires an actual change in behavior and attitude toward one's neighbor and toward God.

This reminds me of two elderly ladies leaving church after a sermon on repentance, where the preacher used St. Paul's example of dying to sin (Rom. 6:11). One lady asked the other, "Do you think you have died to sin?" She replied, I don't know, but I do recall feeling faint a few times."

Well, feeling faint probably does not cut it. John said we must actually do something; make a quick U-turn when we are going down the wrong road and return to what is right.

III.

This leads to John's other point that while he baptized with water, Jesus would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. He anticipated the true significance of Pentecost, and proclaimed in a prophetic way how the Spirit can be part of our lives.

This is because we inwardly receive the Spirit at baptism when the Spirit is sealed as sort of a glowing ember within us. But that ember, to be truly effective in an outward way, must be fanned into flames so that it acts upon us, and enables us to live fruitful lives in Christ.

Some churches call that fire baptism, or baptism by the Spirit. It's also referred to as being born again, or converted. But it is not a new and different baptism. It develops from our one and only baptism, and can happen in a moment or unfold over time.

So even though the Holy Spirit resides within us at baptism, it does not automatically mean the Spirit is working in our lives. The Spirit can remain dormant. We can quench the Spirit. But when our faith leads that ember to be kindled, the Spirit emerges, takes control of our lives, and shines forth through us in all we do. That is when Jesus has baptized us in the Spirit.

And then repentance has meaning. If we are going down some dead-end road, the Spirit does not lead us to just stop and feel bad about ourselves. Instead we are spiritually encouraged to change something, to straighten something out, and to come back to where God wants us to be.

IV.

But I know it is not simple. Every Sunday, in the silence before our confession, my mind is filled with recollections that call for repentance. I doubt that I'm alone in feeling that way. And I would like to suggest there could be two areas where John the Baptist's broad view of repentance is important. The first is within ourselves, and the second is within the church.

Let's start with ourselves. Consider the story of the mother and her young son shopping at the mall. The mother thought her son was following behind as they were walking, but when she looked around she saw that he had stopped and was staring intently through a store window.

She went back and he said, "Mommy, Mommy, look. There's baby Jesus in the manger." And his mother said, "Let's go Johnny, we don't have time for that. We have to get ready for Christmas."

Obviously, the commercialization of Christmas caused Johnny's mother to miss the meaning of Christmas. It also appears she had not given much thought to Advent either.

And we now are in the season of Advent. We lit the second candle today. It's a time of introspection and reflection on our lives, as well as a time of joy and celebration. It's a time when we think about our relationship with God and the place of faith in all we do.

This can lead us to consider how we witness our faith in the world and live as Christian examples. And we can start with Jesus' Great Commandments. Love God and our neighbors.

What about our relationship with God? Do we feel connected, and is our spirituality real and vital, or does God seem far away? Does church uplift our spirits or does it seem routine or dull? Once again, if our faith is not lively we can change what we are doing. God through the Holy Spirit will help us turn around, but he asks us to take the first step and go to him in prayer and in action.

And how do we relate to other people? Do we love our neighbor, or are we sometimes intolerant or self-absorbed. Does pride or selfishness take precedence on occasion over kindness, charity, and patience? If these are areas where we can do better we again can call upon God through the Holy Spirit to help, but again it is up to us to take the first step.

The other way we can carry out John's call to repentance is to help the church recover its prophetic voice in an increasingly secular culture. Many contemporary religious leaders seem to believe that the church's primary role is to function as a social service agency as it carries its work to the poor, needy, and disadvantaged.

And that's a good and important thing to do. The Bible calls us to focus on mission. We live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people. And there seems to be a distribution problem.

But our priority is more than just mission. The Bible also calls us to evangelism and discipleship. We also live in a world full of God and a world full of people who do not know him. Again, there seems to be a distribution problem.

Doesn't it seem that God is absent from much of our culture? And it's not because he moved. We used to see crèches and manger scenes in public settings. Not anymore. Now, it's Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

We also used to feel natural about wishing someone Merry Christmas. But now, unless we are with people we know, we encounter the implicit coercion of political correctness to say Happy Holidays instead. We are expected to suppress our Christianity so we don't offend people of other faiths, or those with no faith at all. But, of course, no such conditions apply to them.

So, today's Gospel sends a message to build up the church as well as strengthen ourselves. And if we do not lead the church in standing against the erosion of God's place in society, who will?

V.

Two thousand years have passed since John the Baptist walked out of the wilderness. Some things have changed, some have not. Nations have come and gone. Cultures have evolved. But the Gospel has stayed the same. What John said then applies now. Through repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ we gain salvation and the church is strengthened.

But even though we try to live faithfully, we don't always accomplish it. Sometimes we might be traveling down that unrighteous road that Satan has made so smooth and attractive for us, and we notice signs put up by the Holy Spirit. U-turn! U-turn ahead! If you see those signs in your heart, do what the sign says. Turn around and go back. John the Baptist was right. And you will find peace, forgiveness, and the joy of the Lord in your life. *Amen.*