

Joy Of Transformation

Mark 1:1-8

December 4, 2011

I.

Earlier this week the manager of a Sears store in Seattle reported that an elderly man walked in, handed him an envelope, and left. You might have read about it or seen it on the news. Inside the envelope was a note, along with a \$100 bill. Apparently the man had worked at the store sixty years ago, had taken a little money, and now wanted to pay it back with interest.

Then manager turned the note over and saw that the man also wrote that he had felt guilty for a long time, and if this didn't make him feel better, he would repay the rest.

Ha! ha! Joke! Just kidding about the last part, but the first part really happened. Obviously this old fellow had come to a moment of repentance and wanted to do the right thing.

That reminds me of the words of Thomas Fuller, a seventeenth century English theologian who said, "You cannot repent too soon, because you do not know how soon it may become too late."

Today's Gospel introduces the importance of repentance in our lives through the appearance of John the Baptist. And his entry onto the stage of history was quite sudden. One day no one had ever heard of him, and the next day he was telling the crowds to change their ways.

You probably have seen cartoon illustrations of a bearded long-haired fellow with ragged robes and sandals carrying a sign that says, "Repent, the World is Coming to an End." That could have been John the Baptist, except that his sign would say, "Repent, the World is Being Renewed."

John was no ordinary fellow. He was Jesus' cousin, and as we heard in the opening lines of our reading today, his ministry was foretold in the Old Testament by the prophet Isaiah over five hundred years earlier. John came to prepare the way for Jesus Christ.

But what needed preparing? Certainly Jesus' work and miracles were going to speak for themselves. What could John the Baptist possibly add to the picture?

Well, certainly John could not add to Jesus. But the people were not quite ready for Jesus either. They were not prepared to receive Christ's entirely new teachings of love, forgiveness, and salvation, never before heard in the world. It was a radical message at the time, and John's baptism, and the peoples' repentance, would create the fertile seed bed for Jesus' words.

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.

II.

So we should examine what John meant by repentance. After all, 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 our view of repentance might be different from John's. For us, repentance might be a sense of regret for doing something wrong, or failing to do something we should have done. The fellow who repaid Sears for his youthful theft is a place to start. He probably felt guilty for a long time, but he also did nothing for a long time. His guilt meant little before he acted.

John the Baptist had a broader view of repentance and the need for transformation. He believed repentance was an act, not just a feeling. It meant changing direction and doing something different, not just being remorseful. Repentance, according to John, required an actual change in behavior, not just a change in how people felt about their behavior.

That means repentance was grounded in turning away from things that interfered with peoples' relationship with God. He called them to reach out in faith as well as to depart from sin.

And for many of us, this might not be a convenient time of year to think about changing how we do things. We might be tempted to say, "Give me a break God, cut me some slack and just let me get through Christmas. Then I'll deal with all that other stuff during Lent."

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.

And as we try to apply John's words in a contemporary setting, we can encounter two areas where John's broader view of repentance are important. The first is within ourselves, and the second is within the church.

III.

Advent is a good time to consider how we are doing, individually. Certainly we anticipate the joy of Jesus' birth, but we also are called to a sense of introspection and reflection on our lives. It's a time to think about our relationship with God and the place of faith in all we do. And we consider that in the context of Jesus' Great Commandments, to love God and our neighbor.

What about our relationship with God? Do we feel connected, and is our spirituality real and vital, or does God seem far away? Does worship uplift our spirits or does it seem routine or dull? At our Roundtable meeting last week I spoke of a priest listening to a fellow say that he used to feel close to God, but now God seemed distant. The priest asked, "Who moved?"

And that priest was not being judgmental or blaming the fellow for feeling less spiritual. He merely was pointing out that God does not move away from us. God always is there.

So, 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 sometimes we might imagine that the vitality of our faith is like a flight of stairs. We climb one of the steps with enthusiasm and rejoice at having gone higher, only to level out for a while as our enthusiasm diminishes. But a new step waits ahead if we persevere.

Then comes the Second Commandment. How do we relate to others? Do we love our neighbor, or are we at times intolerant or self-absorbed. Does pride or selfishness occasionally take precedence over kindness 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.

IV.

But beyond individual spirituality, we also we can echo John's call to transformation by helping the church repent of some of its derelictions, and seek to recover its prophetic voice in an increasingly secular culture. This is work we can do together here at St. Thomas.

Fifty-six years ago C.S. Lewis wrote a partial autobiography titled *Surprised by Joy*. He spoke of his early years as an atheist. However, as a faculty member and author, part of his job was to study the Scriptures, and the more he did so the more he realized they were true, not myths, and he became a devoted Christian.

And looking back he cynically said that an atheist cannot guard his belief too carefully. Dangers lie in wait on every side that threaten to bring him to Christ. A person might become a believer without intending to do so. Lewis saw that Christianity was a force in society.

That was then. Much has changed in those fifty-plus years. Some contemporary religious leaders now see the church as a vehicle for political action. Others minimize God's word and urge the church to function primarily as a social service agency.

And that last part is a good and important thing to do, as far as it goes. The Bible certainly calls us to help the needy. Social services are necessary. We live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people. There seems to be a distribution problem.

But we also live in a world full of God and a world full of people who do not know him. Again, there is a distribution problem. And so we always remember our first ministry of worship, evangelism, and discipleship as we praise God and take our faith into the community.

But often it is not that way. We used to see crèches and manger scenes in public settings, didn't we? Not anymore. Instead, 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, the reverse is not true.

If the church does not proclaim our faith, no other group or institution will do it for us. And if we do not lead the church in standing against the erosion of God's place in society, who will?

Perhaps we actually can help right here. In your service bulletins today is a statement our Roundtable has developed setting forth a recommended vision for St. Thomas. This will be on the agenda at our Annual Meeting next month. That vision is where we start and, among other things, it emphasizes the authority of scripture and truth of the Gospel

And over the next four Roundtable meetings before that time, the rubber will meet the road. We plan to develop recommendations on specific programs and ministries to implement our vision. We will look closely at the mission field here in Diamondhead and how best to do God's will in the community right around us. So please come and participate.

V.

But back to John the Baptist. Two thousand years have passed since this unusual man walked out of the Judean wilderness. Some things have changed, some have not. Nations have come and gone. Cultures have evolved. But the Gospel has stayed the same. And we still are called through John's words to continually be transformed into the people Christ wants us to be.

But even though we try, we don't always accomplish it, and so John's repentance continues to be part of that transformation. We might be traveling down that unrighteous road Satan has made so smooth and attractive, and we notice signs put up by the Holy Spirit. U-turn! U-turn ahead!

If we see those signs in our hearts, do what the signs say. Turn around. Go back. John the Baptist was right. We will find peace and the joy of the Lord in our lives; we will want to share it with those around us, and we can be an even more joyful and exciting church. *Amen.*