

## Snakes, Fruit and Fallen Trees

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UMCG

John the Baptist of biblical fame used to walk through the desert in his bare feet. This, no doubt, left his feet tough, which is understandable...after all, the hot sand and rough terrain would leave anyone's feet tough. He was known to receive signs and messages from God, and occasionally perform mystical feats. He subsisted on a diet of locusts and honey. Without access to dental hygiene at the time, this left him with, well...bad breath. It also left him frail, as his diet wasn't balanced and would have required an immense intake of good food for adequate sustenance. I guess that's why some say that John the Baptist was a super-callused...fragile mystic...plagued with halitosis!

I must admit that at first sight, John the Baptist comes across to many of us today as weird and eccentric. Weird clothes, weird diet, weird home address (the wilderness). Who in their right mind would want to trek for hours through the stifling heat, wilderness rocks and the sand to listen to John who was not at all beyond yelling at you, calling you name names...insulting names--like "snakes" (brood of vipers)—and threatening that if you didn't repent and bear fruit, someone will come along and chop you down like a dead tree and throw you trunk, branches and all into the fire?!

But these eccentricities are a bit more palatable...a bit more understandable when you realize that John the Baptist was in the line of the Hebrew prophets who did some incredibly crazy things to get their message across. Just Google "Sign Acts: The Weird Wonderful World of Prophetic Communication." There you'll be introduced to strange scenes like the prophet Jeremiah smashing clay jars before an audience. The prophet Ezekiel baking bread over human waste. And the prophet Isaiah walking around Jerusalem naked for three years. Very strange indeed unless, perhaps, you live in New York City. All this in an effort to warn the people of Israel of impending doom and exile unless...unless they repent and change their ways. If you ask me, John the Baptist comes across as downright tame compared to his forebears.

The \*Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, in a sermon based on today's Gospel lesson, remarks that to her, "John the Baptist has always seemed like the Doberman Pinscher of the Gospel. In the lectionary, he always appears right before Christmas, when no one's defenses are up. Here we are just trying to get to the stable in Bethlehem. We're not hurrying. We're moving at a respectable pace, and with just weeks to go, it really is in sight—that starlit barn where everything's about to happen...When all of a sudden this big old Doberman has got us by the ankle. 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!' And before he's through, our heads are pounding with vipers, wrath, axes, and unquenchable fire, when all we really want is a chance to sing, 'O Holy Night.'"

"Yet, there is no getting around him. All four Gospels introduce Jesus by talking about John. John's judgement precedes Jesus' grace. They go together, because those who know nothing of judgement need nothing of grace. John the Baptist's business is repentance!"

So...what is this repentance All about? And how does' God's grace relate to repentance?

Some think that repentance is basically *saying you're sorry* for something you've said and done. *Others* think that repentance is more than that...Repentance is *telling* God, and others, how sorry you are for something *with words resulting in action*...that you won't do it again. For yet others, (for example, those in the religious world I was raised in), repentance was tied to God's judgement...God's eternal judgement. No repentance, no eternal salvation in heaven. (Some call this the "turn or burn" version of repentance.) What these perspectives leave out or minimize, however, is *the reason* for repenting. John the Baptist gives us the reason, the why. **Repent...for the kingdom of heaven is near.** This gives us reason also to hope! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near in the person of Jesus, the Savior, whom John will soon baptize. In the person of Jesus, God's kingdom of peace, love, justice, equity and harmony is breaking into this world...our world.

Over the years, I've made it a habit to read a small book by \*\*Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan titled *The First Christmas*. In it they discuss the meaning of repentance as it is rooted in Israel's history. Repentance, they reveal, is rooted

in the nation Israel's experience of exile...first their exile in Egypt around 1500 BCE, then later on their exile in Babylon 1,000 years later in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Repentance, in this tradition, involves a "preparing the way of the Lord...through the wilderness...through the desert." \*\*\*In Israel's history, repentance means returning home from a place of exile, whether Egypt or Babylon. It involves taking the way home through where? The wilderness! The desert! Where did John the Baptist engage in his prophetic ministry in today's Gospel lesson? In the desert! In the wilderness! His audience knew their history, and the significance of his preaching in the desert and his baptizing in the Jordan River.

In this understanding of repentance, to repent means to change, to turn around, to move from a sense of estrangement from God...toward God, reconnecting with God, experiencing God's indescribable love. Repentance in this view is an invitation to return home, a return to hope. This week I found a marvelous definition of "repentance" by John Shea: "Repentance is the response to grace that overcomes the past and opens out to a new future. Repentance distinguishes Christian life as one of struggle and change, not with remorse, but with hope. The message of John (and Jesus) is not "Repent," but "Repent for the Kingdom of God is near."

So how does this apply to us today? As Professor David Lose points out, there are so many things we could repent of personally, as a nation, even as a species! Pollution and climate change. Racism, sexism, xenophobia and homophobia. Poverty. Food scarcity and lack of clean water. Overflowing prisons. Crime and violence. My word! Just think of the challenges our world faces!

So instead of being overwhelmed, let's take Professor Lose's advice and focus... focus on three things.

- 1) Slow down. Stop. Take a moment to dream, to reflect. What is God's vision for you? Who does God want you to be? What does God want you to do? God's dream is for the Kingdom of heaven to come to earth. What's your dream? For your family and friends? Our church and community? Our nation and world?

2) Choose one aspect of your life, just one. What would repentance mean in that one area? Perhaps it's a strained relationship you need to address. Better use of your time. A bad habit you should lose. Revive hope in changing that one area of your life.

And 3) Consider your community. What changes could you make in your life to build a more robust, healthier, equitable and just community? Where can you volunteer to help others in need? What special donation can you offer to make life better for others in the community? Who can you get to know who is quite different from you...politically? Ethnically? Religiously? What is God calling you to do in this season of Advent, and beyond, to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus in your life? And mine? God is calling us to repent! Why? For the kingdom of heaven is already here in the person of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

\*Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, "A Cure for Despair: Matthew 3:1-12," *Journal For Preachers*, Advent 1997.

\*\* Marcus J. Borg & Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas*, Harper One, 2007.

\*\*\* Marcus J. Bork, *The God We Never Knew*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, pp. 132-175.