

John the Baptist: The Look of Repentance
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Buckle your seatbelts, Gracelings (That's what Sue calls you), hang onto your chairs, John the Baptist is coming to town!

I

John the Baptist was a fiery prophet in the tradition of Elijah. Frederick Buechner wrote of Elijah, "If generally speaking a prophet to a king was like ants to a picnic, Elijah was a swarm of bees."

John was not the type you liked to get struck with at a Christmas party. "The world is going to hell", he'd say, then tell you exactly why. "Impeach Herod," he'd mutter, half under his breath, then "Away with the High Priesthood." While other drank their Scotch and eggnog, he carried his own water bottle. Printed on the bottle were the words, "Save the Jordan River."

He had not gone to the finishing school for clergy called Seminary, where they taught you morals and manners and how not to offend anybody. He was schooled in the wilderness, he alone with God, alone with the Holy One of Israel. No *Jerusalem Gazette*, no Fox News or MSNBC. There he was: God, silence and

the Bible he had in his head. He took with him the teachings handed down to him by his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth: The Torah, the Prophets and the Psalms.

Psalm 72 was probably one of his favorites, which he wanted to read to King Herod, if he ever got the chance. Here it is:

Give the king Thy justice, O God...

May he judge Thy people with righteousness
and the poor with justice.

Let the mountains bear prosperity
for the people
and the hills in righteousness.

May he defend the cause of the poor
of the people
give deliverance to the needy
and crush the oppressor.

How should we read this psalm in a *democracy*?

Give our *democracy* Thy justice, O God

May *we* judge the people with righteousness
and the poor with justice.

May *our nation* defend the cause of the poor

give deliverance to the needy
and crush those who oppress.

John may have spent some time with the Essene community of the Dead Sea Scrolls who were living in the wilderness and protesting corruption in high places, both religious and political. But John belonged to no school or group. He belonged to God. He was a one-man reform movement in first-century Judaism.

II

Our text begins with the words: “The word of God came to him in the wilderness.” There alone with God with only scripture in his hand and heart. The word of God *came to him*, so, as the text says,

He went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Then Luke breaks into a song, from Isaiah. I can hear Handel’s *Messiah* now. “The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord
make his paths straight
Every valley shall be exalted
and every mountain and hill shall be made low

and the crooked shall be made straight
and the rough places shall be made smooth
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Repentance: We shy away from the word. It brings a scalding sense of shame. But in fact it is a high and hopeful word, the sound of trumpets over the canyon at dawn: Look, *you can* change, and *life* can change! The great Hebrew word is *Shuv*, to turn, or return to God. The great New Testament word is *metanoia*, a turning of the mind, being given a new mind.

And this turning bought forgiveness. Forgiveness for everyone. You didn't have to jump through any ecclesiastical hoops. It was free. All you needed was a heart that was open and a readiness to change. The temple priests were not happy.

III

John began to draw a large following. All this sounded like good news to them. And so he became a threat to the powers that be, religious and political. Which means that there were some in the crowds who were spying on him to entrap him.

So John said to them: “You brood of vipers, you pit of snakes. You know why you are here.” (John had missed the preaching class on the power of positive

thinking.) Then he turned to them all and said: *Bear fruits that bear repentance!* Then he added, “Don’t lean on your lineage, saying ‘Abraham is my father. We are children of Abraham!’ I tell you from *these stones* God is able to raise up children of Abraham.” Then adding to the urgency of his cry, he said. “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree.’

Then people in the crowd asked “What then should we do?” There were probably others who punched them in the ribs to say, “Don’t ask!” John was ready to answer. “Whoever has two coats share with one who has none.” (Maybe we should bring an offering of coats next week!) And give food for those who have no food, he added. He is speaking of concrete personal compassion here. In the early church there was an offering for the poor every Sunday. We do the same, as every week 20 percent of our gifts go for missions. Then more in special seasons.

There were even *tax-collectors* who came to be baptized! Imagine the last people you’d expect to come to church. Think of who you would like *least* to see coming in the door. And he told them what repentance looked like: “Collect no more than the law requires.” In other words: No gouging. Beware of greed.

Then Roman soldiers in the crowd asked, and he said, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation.” No abuse of power and exploitation. No

“rankism”- Have you heard the term? That is, pulling rank on those of lesser position. Have you ever “pulled rank” on another? Ever had rank pulled on you?

IV

These are individual ways John called on us to practice repentance. But he also called the *nation*, the powers that be, to repent. That is why Herod saw him as a threat, and when John publically condemned him for his personal immorality—wooing away and marrying his half-brother’s wife—that was the straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back. He put him in jail, and later had him beheaded.

So there’s personal morality and immorality and there’s social or public morality or immorality. Nations and communities need to repent too, turn around, change their minds and change their policies which harm people.

What would it look like for our nation to repent? I know, You didn’t ask! And a wise psychiatrist once said: “People are generally not interested in changing the way you want them to.” But here are some reflections on things our nation needs to repent of, based on *biblical* norms, which are deeper and truer than the norms of any political party.

-We need to repent of separating thousands of immigrant children from their parents and housing them in places like those tent cities in south Texas. The

count is now around 14,000. We need to repent of tear gassing women and children in diapers across the US/Mexico border. A major text for Epiphany is the story of the three wise men, or kings, led by the light, of Herod's slaughter of innocent children and of Jesus becoming a refugee, carried by his parents to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous rage.

The most oft-repeated command in the Hebrew Scriptures is to care for widows, orphans and strangers, or immigrants. And Jesus said that to care for the stranger ,or immigrant, was to care for *him*. He once held a child in his arms and said, "If you receive, welcome one such child as this, you receive me, and if you receive me you receive the One who sent me." Is there a simple solution here? No. As one has said, for every problem there is a solution that is simple and easy and *wrong*! But Congress has been unwilling almost twenty years to pass a comprehensive immigration reform act. Bad policies lead to bad action, and migrant children die in Border Patrol custody.

-We need to repent of public policies that enrich those already rich at the expense of the poor and ordinary Americans. We passed a trillion and a half dollar tax cut for the wealthiest Americans. The national debt is rising astronomically, and now the leaders say the solution is to cut Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security. Isaiah the prophet delivered these words from God:

Woe to those who make iniquitous decrees and the writers who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and rob *my poor* of their right...(Isaiah 10:1-2)

God called them “my poor”.

-We need to repent of corporate greed. In the 1950's, 60's and 70's corporate leaders talked about “corporate responsibility”, that is, responsibility not just to share holders, but also to the employees and the community. They called it the “triple bottom line.”

-We need to repent of a political system where big money is undermining democracy. We are becoming a nation by the wealthy and for the wealthy.

-We need to repent of extreme partisanship. Partisanship, said one political scientist is a heck of a drug.

-We need to repent of the idolatry of nationalism. The worship of the nation has been a perennial temptation.

-We need to repent of a social system where it is so difficult for the poor to rise from poverty.

-We need to repent of a corporate and industrial economy that is destroying the earth for the sake of profit.

-We need to turn and care again and again about teachers and public education.

-We need to turn again and care about the growing gap between rich and poor. About 15 years ago I visited Hugh McColl, former President and CEO of Bank of America. He said one of the greatest problems facing us was the extreme gap between the richest and poorest in America. It has only gotten worse since.

There are too many Americans who claim the name of Jesus but prefer the policies of Herod.

We need *metanoia*, to be given a new mind.

This may seem overwhelming, but I see all the ways you are doing your own part to change the part of the world you live in. There was, as one theologian put it, a “downward bent” to Jesus’ ministry. I see ways you “bend” your professions, occupations, public service and the very manner of your lives so that they embody love and serve the ones Jesus called “The least of these”.

Last fall when we went to Congregation Emmanuel on the Friday after the terrible shooting of Jews at worship in Pittsburgh, there was a saying from the Talmud, the Jewish commentary of scripture, which was printed in the worship bulletin. I have carried it with me since.

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

Philosopher John Rawls in his major work, *On Justice*, proposed a thought experiment. What nation would you choose to live in, in what century, if you could not choose *where* in that society you would be born? First century Rome, sixteenth century France, nineteenth century England, twenty-first century America? The more just a society the less it would matter where you were born in that society. How would Statesville and Iredell County stack up by this standard? How can we help make our community a better place to live for more of our people?

V

But John came for more than to call the nation to repent. He came to prepare the way for the Christ, to point to Jesus. When some in the crowds asked if he were the Messiah, he said, "No, there is one greater than I", and he pointed to Jesus the Christ. He said:

I baptize with water; but the one who comes after me will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

What did this mean? Jesus showed us. He came to change what most of all needs changing, our hearts, and to set them on fire with love.

Such love propels us into the world to transform it by the power of love.

Teilhard de Chardin, the French theologian and paleontologist wrote

Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world [we] will have discovered fire.

Here are our questions again. Who am I in this story and God's larger story?

What is God calling me to be and to do? And, who is the neighbor God is calling me to love as I love myself?