

Advent 2A 04 December 2022
Matthew 3:1-12
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.' Let's pray: ...

What if I preached like John the Baptist? What if I was as blunt and direct as he is? What if one Sunday I began my sermon like this?:

"So, what brought you slithering in here today you sons of snakes? Why are you here? To get out of the cold? To see your friends? To make yourself feel better about how faithful and good you are? To get a cup of coffee and a biscuit? Are you here to give God that wish list you call prayer? And don't even start with me about who you are and your Lutheran ancestry. I don't care how many committees you've served on, what you've done for this place or how much money you've given. I want to know what you're doing with your life? Where are you headed? I don't want some polite, banal answer. This isn't dress up and pretend time. This is serious and there're consequences to the way we live and the choices we make. So, if you're here to change your ways, to live a different life, to open yourself to God, to truly love your neighbour as yourself, then show it. Live it. Let that be seen by the choices you make, the priorities you establish, the actions you take, and the words you speak. If that's not why you're here, then get out. Go and crawl back under the rock you came from."

Would you be offended? How would you feel? What would you do if I preached like John the Baptist?

Call Bishop David? Meet in the carpark afterwards and plot my demise? Make some phone calls, send some e-mails? Would you get angry and leave? Withhold your offering? Would you come and talk to me about it, or ask the elders to straighten me out? Would you ignore the sermon? Would you change your life?

Most of us don't want to hear messages like John's. I don't. We're pretty content with our lives and the world. Not content in the sense that everything is perfect and as we want, but that we've settled into a routine that works for us. Maybe we're overwhelmed and feel powerless to do anything. Maybe we're just too tired and too busy to make a change. Maybe we've been hurt or disappointed so many times that we've become indifferent or cynical. Maybe we're so distracted or overcommitted that we've lost sight that "there is need of only one thing" as St Luke says [10:42]. Maybe we feel stuck and paralysed to do anything different from what we're already doing.

There are as many ways of settling as there are people here today. We find a way to manage our lives that at least outwardly seems to be working. We learn how to "play the game" and sometimes even win. We become comfortable, maybe even numb, and we don't want John or anyone else to mess up our life, our plans, our system. We fit in just to get along. And that's true for all of us whether preacher or parishioner.

John's kind of preaching can easily drive people away. It's a hard message to hear. It holds a mirror before us and we often see things we don't want to see or deal with. It's challenging, critical, and uncomfortable. And yet, today's gospel says that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region along the Jordan were going out to hear him. Even the religious authorities, the Pharisees and Sadducees were there. Why?

I believe there's something in us that actually wants, and even needs, to hear John's message. We know that we can see and name the cracks in the veneer of our lives. We know when our lives are out of whack. We know the ways in which we resist or avoid others and struggle with certain relationships. We contradict ourselves. We betray ourselves and our own integrity. We can see patterns and habits that aren't helpful to us or others. But sometimes we just don't want to look into that mirror.

It's easy to believe that's just how it is and how it'll always be. That's just me. That's my life. And I'll settle for what it is rather than what it might be. I'll turn away from my future ensuring that what's always been will continue to be.

That's when we need to hear John the Baptist. We don't need him to tell us that we need to change. We need him to remind us that we can change, that life can be different. We need to hear a message of hope and possibility. That's what Advent is about – hope, possibilities, the coming of the One who is more powerful [to fill us with the Holy Spirit and fire]. I think we all need to be reminded of that.

Life can be different. That's the message of John the Baptist. It's the first thing he says in today's gospel, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

In earlier days, whenever the pastor said the word "Repent", I'd check myself. "Uh oh! He's caught me out again. I'd better pull my socks up, sort myself out, and get into line." It meant being remorseful, sorry for my behaviour, trying harder, and doing my best to be good.

I thought if I could just be good enough and do it all right then everything would work out. But life has a way of raining on that parade. I think you know what I'm talking about. I'm sure everyone could tell stories about trying their hardest, making the right decisions, meeting all expectations, and things still didn't pan out the way they intended. So, where does that leave us?

Saints, what if repentance is about something more than a programme of self-improvement? What if repentance calls us to return to our truer selves? The lives we have in Christ. To stand with integrity and refuse to betray ourselves. To attend to what's going on in our hearts rather than our outward condition or the image we want to project to others.

The way I think about repentance now is that it's like learning to walk. It's not so much about the falling down but whether we're willing to get back up when we do fall. It's less about finding a comfortable groove to stay in and more about opening ourselves up to explore a less certain but more exciting future.

What if repentance is simply about the opportunity to change our mind, have a change of heart, and change the direction of our life, so that it's not so much about guilt or innocence but about wholeness and fullness. Less about the past and where we've come from, and more about the future and where we're headed.

Repentance gives us a future. It invites, calls for, and implores a change – a response from us.

It doesn't have to be huge, or fix everything. It's not a once and for all thing. Repentance is a way of life. We repent our way through life. We repent our way into wholeness.

What's one change that would bring more wholeness and fullness to your life?

Consider making a change that would deepen a relationship you have. Consider making a change that would open your eyes to beauty in the world. Consider making a change that would help you love and accept yourself more than you do. Consider making a change that would soften your heart to the pain and need of someone else. Give some thought to one change you could make today that would open the way to forgiving yourself or another person.

What is one change that you could begin making today that would let you turn to the future with hope and the possibility of the seemingly impossible?

One change. A new start. A future. That's Advent, and Advent promises that something is coming. Saints, God is calling you to repent, not because you're slithering sons of snakes, but because you're worth it. May the Lord, in his infinite mercy, grant you grace to believe this and keep you in the grace of your baptism! Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.