

Repenting in the Wilderness

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Matthew 3:1-6 — In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

If John the Baptist sounds a bit peculiar to you, you’re not alone: he was peculiar to many of his contemporaries as well. While his ministry attracted quite a few lifelong followers, there were many others who strongly disliked him, and some even said that he was demon-possessed. And, if you think about it, we can hardly blame them: what would *you* say about a man who chose to live in a desert and eat locusts all day? Apparently, though, people were drawn to his peculiarity: they left their villages and cities to go and visit this man crying out in the wilderness, preaching to the crowds, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This morning, I want to unpack this message together — “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” — and I want to suggest that, out in John the Baptist’s wilderness, we might learn that something is missing from our own practices of repentance.

When most of us think about repentance, I imagine, we think first and foremost about guilt: believing that we have done something wrong, then feeling bad and sorry about it. But that’s not the ultimate meaning of repentance in the bible. The root of the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means to turn around, to change direction. As theologian John Howard Yoder puts it, “Repentance is not to feel bad, but to think differently,” and therefore to act differently. This means that a message of repentance is not supposed to be condemning, as many of us assume; rather, repentance is a fundamentally hopeful message: it means that change is possible, that we *can* move in a better direction. And John the Baptist is urging the crowds to do so, because “the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

What does that mean? “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” At the time, John the Baptist may very well have been envisioning an apocalyptic drama on the horizon: the messiah, someone anointed by God, was coming to free the Jewish people from Roman rule, and he would usher in a new age of God’s reign on earth. Once John the Baptist encounters Jesus, he is convinced that Jesus is this messiah, the Jewish people’s long-awaited savior. As time passes, however, and as Jesus’ ministry grows, it becomes clear that Jesus isn’t orchestrating a political rebellion. Whatever he may think about Roman rule, Jesus isn’t aiming to free the Jewish people from it — at least, not in the way that John the Baptist and many others had hoped. So, the meaning of John the Baptist’s proclamation — “the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God,

has come near” — shifts over time. It goes from being a militant end-of-times prophecy to being a testimony about what God is doing in Jesus. For Christians today, and for much of history, stating that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” means simply that Jesus has come, and in Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection, God has done and is doing something utterly new in our world. The course of our lives has changed directions in Jesus. And we repent — that is, we change directions ourselves — so that we don’t miss it, so that we can take part in what God is doing through Jesus. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

We as a community have our own rituals of repentance: each week, we confess our sins together, and each week, God’s pardon of our sins is declared. In addition to this, I imagine that you as individuals have often confessed your sins to God and asked God to help you change directions in your life. All of this is an important part of repentance. And it is an important part of the peace that we are proclaiming in this second week of Advent. But this morning, I want to suggest that most of us, including myself, tend to neglect a crucial element of repentance. I want to suggest that when John the Baptist calls us to repent, he is calling us to, in a sense, go out into the wilderness — by which I mean getting off of our beaten path; leaving the mainstream, where we are comfortable, and approaching the margins, where we are uncomfortable. Repenting well, I think, requires engaging people who dwell on the margins, because they are the ones who teach us how we must repent.

A handful of years ago, I was on a mission trip in the Dominican Republic with a group of about 20 people, hosting Vacation Bible School in a rural village. Each day, we walked down a long dirt road that led into the village, and each day, we were escorted by dozens of skipping, screaming children. On our first day, I happened to notice, on the edge of the dirt road, a single child who was not skipping or screaming. In fact, she made no sound and expressed no emotion. She sat in a small wooden chair and rocked back and forth, hugging a teddy bear that looked like a dog’s chew toy. Her face was slightly disfigured. Her crossed eyes followed our group as we walked past. I happened to make eye contact with her, and immediately I looked away. Irrational fear. For the next few days, I conveniently looked in other directions every time we entered and exited the village. It wasn’t until our last day there, when we were walking towards Vacation Bible School, that it hit me: God is grieved by my disregard of this child, and I need to repent. As our group passed her seat, I looked at her and waved. No response. But at the end of the day, on our way back from Vacation Bible School, while we were still some 20 yards away from her seat, she began waving frantically with both hands, beaming from ear to ear, making unintelligible noises whose meanings were perfectly clear. Through this girl, who I encountered on the edge of a dirt road, God brought me into a fuller, deeper repentance. And in this girl, I saw the direction that my repentance would take me.

Friends, John the Baptist is out in the wilderness, and this peculiar prophet invites us to join him there, off our beaten path, where people on the margins dwell. Let’s be on the look-out, friends, for those who are crying out from the wilderness. It’s from them that we learn how we must repent, and it’s in their direction that a repentant people will walk.

As we come to this table today, let's remember that Jesus himself dwelled on the margins. If we experience Christ in the bread and the cup here, let us also experience Christ in the wilderness out there. Amen.