

Second Sunday in Advent
December 8, 2013
Performing or Transforming?
Matthew 3:1-12

Introduction

Many of you know that Diane and I are expecting our fourth grandchild anytime now. (I know. Grandparents are weird. Probably better to say that our daughter is expecting her fourth child.) Of course, a new baby in the family means a new reality for parents and siblings. This is even truer when it's the first child on the way. You parents know what I mean. Prior to the birth of our first, my mother-in-law bought a house for us to rent. She didn't want her grandchild living in an apartment in L.A. Diane twisted my father-in-law's arm to paint and wallpaper the bedroom which would become the nursery. (Like the baby would really care!) In the meantime, I pretty much covered in the corner. I knew my life was about to change, but had no idea to what extent.

We've all had to prepare for change in our lives. If it wasn't a new baby, it might have been a new job or, even more challenging, a new boss. The issue of change and new realities was the landscape of the beginning of each of the four Gospels. John the Baptist set up shop out in the wilderness and started calling people to get ready for a massive change.

The Word – Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
 'Prepare the way of the Lord;
 make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John the Baptist’s Mission

It seems as if John the Baptist was a wild and crazy guy. Don’t let his outfit and diet throw you off. Both would have been typical of a nomadic desert dweller of the time. His appearance would have reinforced the idea that his message was counter-cultural - including the poor and the disenfranchised of his day. He wasn’t privileged or particularly attractive by the world’s standards. But Jesus said of him, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11).

John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. The Scriptures foretold that a prophet like Elijah (Mal. 4:5-6) would precede the coming of the Jewish Messiah. In the words of Isaiah, he would “prepare the way” – the idea of laying a roadbed, raising the valleys and leveling the hills. His message was provocative and simple: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is right at your front door.” It was the same message that Jesus preached at the beginning of his ministry. There was a sense of urgency – an imperative to get ready because things were going to radically change. Those who repented demonstrated their change of heart by being baptized in the Jordan River.

When we think of repentance, we think of giving up our private sins and becoming more religious. We have our list of “don’ts” that we forsake and our new list of “do’s” that we obligate ourselves to. But John’s first-century listeners would have considered “repentance” a much deeper change than a code of morals. The Jews of that time had a standard of morality that would rival or surpass any code of ethics and behavior in the world’s history.¹ It was not simply a matter of changing one’s behavior that would enlist a person in the kingdom of heaven. It was a matter of your life’s agenda. The right behavior then would follow the right orientation.

There is a secular story that is contemporary to the writing of Matthew’s gospel that is helpful in understanding what John the Baptist meant in his call to repentance. Josephus was a well-recognized historian for Palestine in the first century. He was also an officer in the Roman army, sent to quell a rebellion in Palestine around 60 A.D. The Jewish people always chafed under Roman rule and rebellions were common. They were always subdued with a heavy military hand. When Josephus confronted the Jewish rebels, he used words similar to John the Baptist and Jesus when he advised them to “repent and believe in me.”²

¹ N.T. Wright’s perspective on first century repentance is very helpful here. *The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 25-27.

² _____, p. 26.

To repent in the gospels means to abandon one's personal agenda and put yourself under God's rule. It is not simply a call to behavioral change, but one that is much more radical. It's not a matter of performance – the good works that you do (remember, the people at the time were very moral) – but rather a matter of being transformed, changed from the inside out. The behavior will be the fruit of inward orientation towards God's rule.

Who Were the Pharisees and Sadducees?

The narrative pivots and abruptly changes when John observes the religious leaders in his growing audience:

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.’”

At the time, there were three primary religious sects in Judea: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Essenes were a radical group, fed up with the political posturing of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They lived monastic lives in desert communities. Some believe that John the Baptist might have been an Essene. The Sadducees controlled the Temple: its service and its worship. They were theologically and politically liberal. They also didn't believe in the resurrection. (And that was why they were sad, you see...) The Council, the ruling body of Jewish society was made up of both Sadducees and Pharisees so it was natural for some of them to come and check out the commotion that John the Baptist was causing in the desert.

What about the Pharisees? Throughout each of the gospels, they always get a bad rap. That fact should grab our attention. Like it or not, we share some of the very same values and practices as them. The Pharisees had probably the highest moral behavior of anyone at the time. There's a reason why Pharisees were so particular in their behavior. They had learned the hard lesson of God's judgment from the Exile to Babylon five hundred years before and they never wanted to experience it again. So they made up all kinds of rules to make sure that they weren't violating God's Law and thus, incur his judgment. Not only did they have a strict code of moral conduct, but they were committed to the Word of God, faithful giving and prayer. Most likely, many pastors today would be happy to have them in their church. They were models of religious citizenship. (Pause)

Why then, was John the Baptist so harsh with them? The answer lies just beneath the surface of our text and becomes obvious as the story in the gospels progress. They were self-righteous. They believed they were on God's side by their good intentions and behavior. But they were promoting their own self-righteous agenda. John calls them to repentance and to bear fruit as evidence of their change of heart. It wasn't an issue of good works but rather of who was king –

God or their own exalted self. The issue wasn't performing good works. It was the question of transforming their soul.

Nicodemus

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 is helpful in grasping what was missing in the Pharisee's orientation. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a teacher, and a good moral man. He eventually became a follower of Christ and helped to bury him after the crucifixion. But John 3 narrates his first encounter with Jesus.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Nicodemus was probably typical of the Pharisees in his understanding. He was a religious teacher and yet he did not grasp the necessity of being "born-again." The truth that Jesus was presenting was probably the greatest stumbling block of all the religious leaders of his day. It still remains to this day. It is not what you do that brings you into the Kingdom of God; it is a matter of your heart. The Old Testament prophets spoke of the new heart that God would give his people:

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Jeremiah 31:33

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." Ezekiel 36:25-27

John the Baptist, and later, Jesus preached repentance – turning from our own agenda (as good as that may seem) and aligning our lives with God’s kingship and purpose. That is the new heart promised by the prophets.

The Question for Us

Now what do Pharisees and repentance have to do with us this morning? I believe this message applies to two kinds of people. First, it is a warning to moral religious people that your own good works will not bring you into God’s kingdom. You must be born again. You need a new heart. You need to turn from your own agenda that you can control and realign your life to follow Jesus. Without that kind of repentance, you will not enter the kingdom of God but you already stand under condemnation. Read the rest of John 3. Along with repentance – turning to God – you must turn to Jesus Christ and trust in him – his death and resurrection on your behalf. (In just a few moments you will see that kind of faith demonstrated powerfully through Christian baptism. If you’ve never trusted Christ, but are trusting in your own good deeds, today is a good day to repent: to receive Christ as your Savior. Prior to the baptism, I will lead the congregation in a short litany of faith. If you are prepared to turn from your own agenda and follow Christ, then say those words with all your heart. Then let someone know so that we can help you in your life in Christ.)

The second group for whom this message is intended lies heavy on my heart. I pray that you will have ears to hear. You are the ones who, at one point, have received Christ as your personal Savior but you are no longer being changed and growing.

I’m terrible with houseplants. There is only one type that I can grow and that is because it can take a lot of neglect and abuse. Every other plant I buy for the house wilts and dies within six months. And Diane is not any better. We found that it is much better to decorate our house with silk flowers. They don’t need water or any kind of care. They look good, but they never change. They never grow.

A lot of Christians are like that. They look good, but they never change. They don’t grow.

Like the Pharisees, we’re really good at making up rules to make ourselves look spiritual.

- Don’t drink.
- Don’t smoke.
- Don’t dance.
- Don’t cuss.
- Wear your best clothes on Sunday.
- Attend all church activities.

- Give at least 10% of your income to the church.
- Do your daily devotions.

I'm not preaching against those things. But I am saying it is possible to do those things and still live in the kingdom of Bob...or whoever you are. We sometimes follow this list in order to make people think we are under Christ's lordship and condemn those who don't follow our list to a tee. Sorry. The gospels condemn those kinds of antics.

I sometimes wonder where Jesus might hang out today. I never went into a bar to drink or to socialize, but I worked a late night restaurant shift one summer. We'd always get heavy business at 2 AM as the bar next door would close. Let me tell you, there were some really messed-up people. And most of them would be glad to open up their lives to you. Broke my heart. I've often wondered if we wouldn't sometimes find Jesus in a place like that today because that's where all the broken people are.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:10-13

It's easy to look like a Christian. We've got rules to live by but we still control everything. It is far harder to live like one. God has control of your life and you are surrendered to him. Friends, this performance-based Christianity is pervasive in our churches. It has become part of our culture. It seems to do no harm because it looks so good on the surface. But there's no life there. It's oppressive, and there are many people – especially young people – who see it for what it is and stumble over it – walking away from the Christian faith. We think we have to do things for God. Such thinking will never bear any fruit because it comes from us. I like what Beth Moore says: "It's not what we do for Jesus that bears fruit, but rather what we do with him." Jesus said, "apart from me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Are you a silk flower that looks good on the outside but never changes? Or are you a real plant, rooted in God and dependent on him for nourishment and light? Whose agenda are you pursuing? Yours or God's? Are you focused on performing for God or allowing Him to transform your life?

Hear John the Baptist's call to you this morning. It is in repentance that you will find real life.

