“In Those Days”

Advent II
Matthew 3:1-12

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

December 4, 2016

From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
Prayer for Illumination: Speak to us, Lord. Speak to us in the waiting, the watching, the hoping, the longing, the sorrow, the sighing, and the rejoicing. Speak to us by your Word in these Advent days, and walk with us until the day of your coming. Amen.

Oh, that John the Baptist. There he goes again. We read a text about John the Baptist every year in the season of Advent, sometimes more than once. This year, well…I been thinking a lot about him. I try to tame his dangerous, wild attitude and suggest a better diet. With his ‘out of control’ nature—I want to put him in time out. He’s not charming. He’s far from amusing. I try to clean him up, give him a nice shave, some new clothes, and for goodness sake, I want make him eat a few more green vegetables. Broccoli, kale, a few brussels sprouts, maybe.

But here he is! We can’t go much further into Advent without hearing his unrelenting voice in our ears.

In the first century, what a unique character John the Baptist must have been! In those days, he was the first prophet in Israel in four hundred years, he burst on the scene with a bizarre appearance and a powerful message: God is about to do a new thing among us, and you must repent.
This is about repentance. We need to prepare the way of the Lord, but must repent first. We can’t get away from his message and those words; “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” In other words, if you want to get to Jesus, you have to go through John the Baptist first.

Repentance makes the claim that even when we are at our best (and let’s be honest, we are rarely at our best) we are incomplete, we fall short, we miss the mark, we sin.

Sin is a word that has lost its place in our culture. Nowadays it is usually applied to (sweet) desserts—as in “oh, that chocolate cake is so good, it is positively sinful.” The word sin has fallen on hard times.

Over the years, the word “sin” has so often been associated with judgment and guilt. The word has been used too often as a stick with which to hit people over the head. We don’t talk that much about sin. In fact, if you listen, you may conclude that nobody sins anymore. We make mistakes. We err in judgment. We assume that we are basically nice people who are making progress. I’m OK, you’re OK.
If only that were the case. I’m not ok. Never have been and never will be. I am a sinner – not just a person who occasionally does bad things. No, I am a sinner. We all are. In order to come to grips with that, we need to take a close and hard look at who we really are and what we have done in our lives.

Our tradition knows that the way forward is through repentance.

This brings us to confession (personal and corporate). In worship, during the season of Advent, we confess our sins. We add a prayer of confession each Sunday. The prayer of confession is a time to acknowledge that the world is not the way we would like it to be and more specifically that I have not been all that God would like me to be. The prayer of confession is the time to name that and move forward knowing that the future doesn’t have to be the same as the past. After our confession, we hear words of assurance. I am forgiven, you are forgiven, we are forgiven and empowered for new life in Jesus Christ. Somehow, in the end, it is less about guilt than it is about hope.
Author Frederick Buechner says this about repentance. “True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I'm sorry’ than to the future and saying, ‘Wow’.”

I love that because most of us have been taught that repentance and confession are all about owning up to how rotten we are. Repenting means saying out loud that we are sinful, rotten and selfish and we are really, really sorry and we’ll try to do better in the future.

What if that which we need to repent for is something more like our despair? Or that we feel powerless to change our circumstances or that we somehow don’t deserve a new beginning.

In Hebrew, the word for “repent” literally means to turn away, to turn around, to change directions. It may seem obvious - you need to be facing in the direction you want to go. If God is our home, then we need to be facing God. If only it was that easy.

Repentance is about reorienting our entire life so that everything revolves around God. It means placing more and more areas of our life under God’s care and scrutiny. It means

---

1 Buechner, Frederick, Peculiar Treasures.
that when we make decisions about how we spend our time and money those decisions are shaped by our relationship with God. Repentance is about letting God shape everything.\footnote{Initial comments in conversation with Amy Miracle, sermon on Repentance, Fall 2016.}

By claiming repentance, we say that change is possible. It underscores that change isn’t necessary for change’s sake, but rather that change is necessary because we’ve become aware that our actions are out of step with God’s deep desire for peace and equity for all God’s people.\footnote{http://www.davidlose.net/2016/11/advent-2-a-reclaiming-repentance/}

Take for a moment Isaiah’s vivid imagery in our Old Testament lesson this morning. Does our world reflect the grand images of that “Peaceable Kingdom?” We are far from that. Think of our world. Think of the week that the faculty, staff, students at The Ohio State University have had in the wake of Monday’s tragedy. Think of the increase in hate crimes. Think of the divisions in our communities, among our families. The world is not what is it is supposed to be.

We have to believe that the way things are in our world today IS NOT good enough. We deserve a world where no one lives in abject poverty, a world where there is enough food and hope for all, a world where people of all ages can go to class and

\footnote{Initial comments in conversation with Amy Miracle, sermon on Repentance, Fall 2016.}
worship without fear, a world where every single one of us has an unending supply of new beginnings. What is the vision that you see? Imagine a world as God sees it. As Buechner would call it—“Wow!”

God aches for us to live in such a world. But it’s not enough for God to want that for us. We need to want it too. No one can take that first step for us. And unless we are willing to take that first step, God cannot do God’s work of healing us and healing the world. No repentance, no wow.

In a few moments, we’ll come forward and receive communion. A remembrance and celebration of the new life we have in Jesus Christ. As you come forward up the center aisle, take a moment to think of what needs to be different in your life this Advent season.

Here are a few questions I’ve been thinking of:
  Is your life a place in which God might wish to dwell?
  What housecleaning do you need to do to make it so?
  What do you need to let go of: old habits, grudges, anger, sadness, shame, despair?
  What do you need to let go of to make room for the coming of God?
A friend this week reminded me of the following story. It’s one about Scrooge. Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol tells the story of an old and bitter miser, Ebenezer Scrooge, who undergoes a profound experience over the course of one evening, courtesy of the three ghosts who visit him in the night. It’s called A Christmas Carol but it’s not a Christmas story. It’s an Advent story. It’s a story about a repentance that makes room for the coming of God. Because the three ghosts are John the Baptist figures. They tell Scrooge – look at your life, look where you’ve been, look where you are going, change course, move in a different direction, embrace a new beginning.

And that is exactly what Scrooge does. He looks at his messy house and says “I shouldn’t have done that.” And then he cleans up his house. He sweeps out pain and anger, fear and loneliness, and, in doing so, makes room for the coming of God into his life.

Think of the wild crazy joy that Scrooge experiences on Christmas Day. That joy is the fruit of repentance.

The first part of that joy is finally coming clean about who he is. The second part of that joy is the sure knowledge that the future can be different than the past. That first joy has
everything to do with John; that second deeper joy has everything to do with Jesus. Because Jesus is in the business of granting forgiveness, release, fresh starts, new beginnings.⁴

There’s no fresh start without a commitment to change; no forgiveness without a decision to repent. That is what John the Baptist preaches—a confession that creates a new beginning. A repentance that creates a space for the coming of God.

There is no mistaking that John the Baptist is an Advent character we can’t get away from. John the Baptist begs you to stop. Take a look at your life. He turns us around. He turns us toward God.

Does the way you live your life reflect your deepest values? Would you like the future to be different than the past? Is your life a place in which God might wish to dwell?

These are Advent questions - questions that help us prepare for the coming of God into our lives. Questions that help us prepare for Jesus.

Come Lord Jesus Come! Amen.

⁴ Thankful for Rev. Amy Miracle sharing this story with me for this Advent 2 text.
Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC