

3rd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.11.16
Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

When John was preaching repentance, he probably didn't suppose he himself would need to repent. The exhortation sounded pretty outward bound, after all: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Aimed at the audience that was just now beginning to gather, the people of Jerusalem and all Judea going out to him for baptism, this doesn't sound self-referential or ironic — John as a hipster-prophet. This certainly doesn't sound like an enlightened liberal preacher who knows that every sermon preached is one the preacher herself needs to hear. This sounds like someone unequivocal, someone who knows where the real need for repentance lies — and it wasn't within him.

The thing is, I think he was wrong.

Last week we'd have heard him say it, as we do on the 2nd Sunday of Advent every year: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This urging is somehow linked to baptism, as are John's more pointed comments that follow: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" This appears in both Luke's gospel and in Matthew's. But in Luke, these are aimed at the crowd in general, while in Matthew, these are aimed more specially at the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious authorities of Matthew's day. "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."

To be honest, I'm not sure why Matthew was so disgusted with the religious authorities, so much more so than Luke, not to mention Mark and John. But I suspect it's because Matthew was a Jew. Unlike Luke, who was a Gentile, Matthew it seems was a Jew, a Jewish-Christian who'd converted to the Way likely as an adult.

If this is all true, then he'd have done so at a time when established Jews would have had no sympathy for Jewish-Christians. They had upset the social order, after all. A new offshoot amidst an already tangled growth of teachings and traditions, these Jewish-Christians had complicated an already complex political order; and now Rome was acting against Israel in all out war.

Whether coincidental with the birth of church or spurred by it, Rome was done with tolerance as regarded Judea and Jerusalem; it was done with tolerance as regarded the Temple and its traditions. Whether because of new developments amidst Israel or because of new depravity amongst the leadership of Rome, it's impossible to say and it hardly matters. It would leave Jerusalem destroyed, the Temple in ruins, hundreds of thousands of people dead, and everyone with an idea as to who was to blame.

The Jews would blame the Jewish-Christians.

The Jewish-Christians would blame the Jewish religious authorities that had for so long compromised with brutal Rome.

As for Rome, of course, the imperial overlords: they would be above blame because that's how these things go.

Matthew, I think, blamed the religious authorities because these are people whom he had once *personally* regarded as authoritative, people who now had perhaps personally come to blame the likes of him. That sort of betrayal can run deep, and could well have then fueled the zealous accusation Matthew directs against them, which he does not only by way how he remembers John to have spoken ("You brood of vipers!") but also throughout this gospel narrative, which we'll follow throughout the coming year.

Let's listen for it, then; and take a careful ear to it. Matthew's condemning certain people need not mean our condemning certain people. More crucially, it shouldn't indicate to us that these are the people, then, whom God would condemn—if God is taken to condemn at all.

Which brings us to the point.

Repentance: it's not what you think.

You hear it, I know you do: you hear it to mean that you should take note of your own guilt. Repentance: you assume it to mean the act of taking stock of your own sinfulness, your own waywardness, all that stuff that makes you condemnable. To repent is a painful process of really noticing all the aspects of yourself—all you are and all you've done—that you otherwise want desperately to go unnoticed. You do it because you're told to, and you're told to because the kingdom of God has come near—itsself a frightful prospect because amidst such a kingdom all secrets are revealed, all truth is out, all that seeks darkness is pulled violently into the light.

Yikes.

You know all this, right?

But what if you're wrong? What if we're wrong?

“Repent” comes to us from the Greek word *metanoia*. This means, simply, a change in knowing, a transformation of mind. Consider: *noia* is knowledge, and *meta* indicates transformation and also that which lies beyond or behind and also that which is of a second-order or higher-order. *Metanoia*, then (that is “repentance”) means a change of knowing, a transformation and even expansion of mind. To repent, then, is to undergo a change in your way of thinking, a transformation of your mind. A deepening of your imagination, an opening of your attention, a widening of what you wonder about, an expansion of your mind that it might approach the wide and high knowledge of God, which is both knowing God and also knowing what God knows.

Repentance is not a painful process but a freeing one, not a punishing process but an expansive one, not a shaming prospect but a promising one. Linked somehow to the fact that the kingdom of heaven has come near, repentance isn't something you'd better undergo (as if it's simply a matter of decisiveness and human will) but something you'd be better for having undergone (as if a matter of mystery and the Spirit).

But what is that link? Is it that the kingdom of heaven having come near causes *metanoia*, causes repentance; or is it that *metanoia*, repentance causes the kingdom of heaven to come near? Is it that the closeness of God spurs the transformation of your thinking, or that the transformation of thinking spurs recognition of God's closeness? Is the immediacy of God the cause of widened human imagining and wondering, or is it the affect, you now enabled, empowered, inspired to sense the immediacy of God? Which is it? Is repentance the cause of the kingdom of heaven coming near or is it in service of the kingdom of God coming near? Which is cause and which is effect?

The reason we've been wrong about repentance is because the wrong explanation is so much easier to understand. It's so much easier to understand that we're probably bad and need to change than that we're invited to participate in a mystery that we will never master. It's so much easier to “get” that whatever we manage to get in this life is ours to get or ours to lose as the case may be, than the impossible possibility that we are gotten, we are had and held and moved and saved because the Spirit will have it be so.

But, *if* we've been wrong all along about repentance, about *metanoia*—its implications, its aims, its affects—then we've been in some pretty exalted company.

John seems to have been fairly certain what the implications were of the kingdom of heaven coming near, and all the more so as remembered and reimagined by Matthew. It was about a coming wrath that would punish the deserving. It was about an eradication of fruitless trees and useless, corrupt people. It was about a Messiah who, in bringing near the kingdom of heaven, would hold a winnowing-fork in hand and, with it, would clear his threshing-floor, grain to be put to good use and chaff to be condemned to unquenchable fire.

What's more, this would all be to the good. The world was, after all, full of chaff deserving of such a fate. Corrupt religious authorities were chief among the "chaff"—but they were also just the beginning. The imperial occupation—its tetrarchs and soldiers, its distant emperor who had yet immediate affect, its constant and intensifying warring even within its own broad borders. Then thinking domestically—the persistence of injustice, the relentless problem of poverty and the dispossessed. There was so much to make right in the world that, the sooner vengeance and recompense got underway, the better.

And now he had come—to the world in the baby whose coming we are even now anticipating as we count down the days of Advent; to the banks of the Jordan where he would indeed receive the baptism of repentance (though John nearly insisted it should be the other way around); and, skipping ahead in the story, to the region of Galilee as he made his way, preaching and teaching, healing and restoring. The Messiah: he had come, and he had gotten to work.

But to what end?

Because, meanwhile, things for John had gotten even worse. Zealous as ever, sharp-tongued as ever, John had landed himself in prison. Having prophesied against Herod and his marriage to Herodias (once his brother's wife), John ended up in the dungeon at the foundation of Herod's palace. Here he would live out his remaining days until his death—an ignominious execution that amounted to entertainment for a dinner party.

Word reached him, though, nonetheless: word about what the Messiah was doing and, by implication, what the Messiah was *not* doing.

He wasn't taking the religious authorities to task—not that often anyway, and not that forcefully.

He wasn't driving out the occupying army or dismantling the empire.

He wasn't unseating Herod from his throne and freeing the prisoners who'd been unjustly imprisoned.

He wasn't clearing his threshing floor.

There was little mention of unquenchable fire.

There was no winnowing fork, hardly any winnowing at all.

And what of the chaff? There's so goddamn much chaff. Shouldn't he be doing something about that?

Something here is deeply wrong, either with us or with You.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus seems to have understood the possibility that John would take offense at him. He was doing his work, yes. The blind were receiving their sight, and the lame were walking again. There were miracles and restorations. There was new hope for the poor and new life for those dying. There was much building up. There just wasn't much tearing down or even turning of tables. The way of salvation wouldn't be quite the gleeful and gratifying affair one might have anticipated. The way of salvation would be slow and subtle, apparently, gentle but persistent. Anyone looking for a spectacle, a show of force, might be disappointed, might even be offended. After all the problems of the world weren't slow and subtle, *aren't* slow and subtle. No, the problems of the world aren't gentle but persistent. The things of this world from which the righteous need saving are terrible and terrifying. So the savior we need must be equally terrible and terrifying, right?

This is what John prophesied, what he promised. This is what he presumably had wanted and now what he needed. It had been the case that his reputation was on the line, but now so was his life.

"Are you the one who it to come, or are we to wait for another?"

People ask the same question these days — people who look to Jesus as someone whose judgment of the world will equal condemnation of many in the world, people who anticipate Jesus' second coming to the world (in violent recompense) as resembling not at all his first coming to the world (in a baby, poor, itinerant, a bastard born in a barn and laid to sleep in a feeding trough), people who confess Christ because they think it will keep them safe rather

than cost them everything. People ask all the time of this wise, kind, courageous, empathic man, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?”

When John asked this question, it was the beginning of his own repentance, the beginning of his own radical change of mind, a transformation of knowing. His expectation of what Jesus would do had been misguided. His notion of how Jesus would perform as the Messiah had been wrong. He had been thinking very much in the terms and conditions of this world. You meet force with force. You overcome violence with violence. You disrupt abuse of power by mustering to your will a greater power. It’s all very clear. It’s all very straightforward and easy to understand. But it’s wrong.

When it comes to Jesus, when it comes to God, it’s wrong. It’s a shortfall of imagining. It’s a failure to think bigger. It’s wrong, and it’s a call—an invitation—to repentance, to *metanoia*.

That John was in need of *metanoia*, though it might have distressed John himself, hardly fazed Jesus at all. After all, wasn’t it John’s zeal that had made him such an effective herald in the first place? Wasn’t it his stridence that made him a prophet but also more than a prophet—a messenger, a way-maker? He prepared a way in the world for something radically new though of old. He cut a path for Jesus into his life as the Messiah and then through it. Jesus followed John from the first to the last in this life—born as he was born (unlikely, impossible, miraculous!) and died as he died, both at the hand of feckless power. And wasn’t it just this quality that had made John so essentially and crucially John?

So what if now it’s just this quality that John needed to break out of, to outgrow?

So what? There’s no shame in needing to undergo *metanoia*. It’s an opportunity, actually: a delight, a thrill.

It’s difficult, too; can be heartbreaking. To let go your expectations, which have perhaps been informed by your needs; to surrender your management of things, your sense of control, your powers of dictation unto a wide, wild world; to revise your tradition and to reexamine received wisdom and to accept things that seem beyond tolerable, beyond the pale: faithful repentance is not merely a delight. It is also a tall order unto a higher order.

I wonder what John came to think. I wonder how his mind changed when word reached him back in prison that Jesus is the one to come, that we are to wait on him and no other.

It could have come as a heartbreak. He would not be rescued from Herod the feckless and Herodias the terrible. He would die because of the way the world worked.

It could also have come as blessing, that the way of Herod is not the way of God, that that way of empire is not the way of God, that the force of God is the force of love, gentle though persistent, enfolding yet freeing, freely offered to be freely received. It wouldn't save him from Herod but it would save him in that it would and will and is saving the world.

It's not always bad, being wrong.

Thanks be to God.