



University Christian Church

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Another Inconvenient Truth

Advent 2, a, Dec. 9, 2007

Matthew 3:1-12

Here we are, on this second Sunday of Advent.

- Last week we had a beautiful Hanging of the Greens Liturgy that spoke to us of our traditions of this season... that spoke of our continuity with past.
- This afternoon a fine Christmas program by our children and youth will speak of the faith that they – the future- have accepted and will pass on.
- Next Sunday a fabulous choir presentation will speak...in a voice of a muse, will beguile us as they are so want to do.
- And this morning, we have.....John the Baptist!

What an unlikely....OK, and unwelcome, element of the season! John the Baptist, isn't likely to be popping up on your mantle with the Wise Men and rest of the crèche characters. I'm still waiting for my first view of a shouting, scolding John the Baptist figure in 6 ft. plastic with a light bulb inside him...as we drive through Austin's wonderfully lit, Christmas decorated neighborhoods.

Or how about a nice Hallmark card....one of the tall ones. When you pull the card out of its envelope, out drops a half-eaten, wild-honey dipped locust with artificial camel smell. On the front there's a lanky, sunburned,

wild-eyed John the Baptist. You open the card to find a huge, angry mouth and the little battery operated sound device we find in cards these days, repetitively yells...”You brood of vipers....You brood of vipers...”

Or the tamer version, that on the inside shows a photo of your correspondent’s family, sitting around a hearth, captioned:

"Greetings from our house to yours. Our thoughts of you at this time of the year are best expressed in the words of John the Baptist, 'You brood of Vipers! The ax is laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be thrown into the fire.' Merry Christmas from the Sullivans." ⁱ

No, by and large, we prefer the round to thin, jolly to angry. We’d prefer Santa, thank you very much. Too bad it isn’t as simple as that.

Each of the first three gospel writers put John the Baptist at the beginning of the story. The message is clear: if you want to get to the joy of Bethlehem, if you want to encounter the saving power of the Christ, you must first get to the Jordan where John the Baptist is. You must first confront and be dealt with by this crazy prophet out in the wilderness whose words are bitter and as hard as the rocky terrain. It is not a pleasant prospect. It is ANOTHER INCONVENIENT TRUTH.... but there it is. There it is.

What is the nature of the essential Truth that John stands for? John’s proclaiming that the “Kingdom of God is near” is already going to be clear as the Christmas story unfolds, but what jumps out at us from John the Baptist that is unique here early in the Gospels, is his emphasis on the need for everyone to REPENT.

Repent. Turn around.

What did he say?

"Bear fruit worthy of repentance!" And we say, "There goes John! Get'em! He's attacking the street hoodlums, the bank robbers & the white collar crooks. John's after the rip-off artists & the perverts, the religious holier-than-thous....not us. Go get'em John!"

But then John the Baptist turns to us, and says: "And don't you say, 'We have Abraham for our father,' Don't you say 'Oh, I do believe that Jesus is the Christ.... And I really, really intend – some day- to start following Christ better. Don't say that those of your family have always been fine, upstanding members of this church, that you're always so kind to your wife, your husband, and your children; and besides that, that you actively support several important benevolences, and that everyone thinks you're nice."

"It's not ABOUT NICE," John says.

It is about changing.... Changing from what we are like, to what we know God calls us to be like....

When we hear the word, REPENT, many of us will remember caricatures of characters just as wild as John making statements that we consider....well, silly. But the truth is that there's nothing silly about this call. Beneath our Christmas card sentimentality, our Norman Rockwell images, we need to take a hard look at ourselves and see that, yes, we are the ones John is talking to. Beneath our tendency to focus on what human beings can do, our wonderful accomplishments, our carefully contrived self-images, we need to hear John the Baptist's call to repentance, so that we measure ourselves not by what our neighbors and friends say, by but by what the Lord of the universe says.

Imagine that in this very moment, John the Baptist is running down the center aisle of our Sanctuary, stopping in front of different ones of us, crying “repent,” and all the others of us wondering what they might need to be repenting of. But we know. We all know. It has always been so with us.

>Over there, a self righteous Pharisee named Saul comes to recognize his part in the murder of a Christian, and knows in his heart that he has to change, he needs to become a new person that God truly fashions;

- Then John stands in front of another parishioner who bows his head. It is Augustine of Hippo, St. Augustine, and his reckless embrace of worldliness, that needs change altogether.
- Over there, Ignatius of Loyola, a man whose professional military service left in its wake unknown numbers of dead.
- Over there the slave trader John Newton thinks of his shameful treatment of slaves and begins to recognize the graceful hand, the amazingly graceful hand that is calling him to something better, so much better;
- Down here Dorothy Day recognizes the shortcoming of her faith in materialistic communism and likewise begins in this moment to dedicate her life to living and working among the poor of the city.
- Over there Charles Colson, sitting in a church pew just as he sat in the Oval Office, a fellow conspirator or in Watergate. He feels the challenge of John and hears through him a call to a new vocation, a call to minister the word of God to prisoners.

And now John the Baptist is looking at us, at you and me. He is saying nothing. He is just there with that insistent, with that consistent glare, with that challenge to who we are. What will we repent of? What will you and I give up? What will we change?

We Protestants don't have a very good grasp of the nature and extent of the brokenness that the Bible calls "sin." But if we had grown up in the Roman Catholic Church the seven deadly sins, the seven capital sins may come to mind as a kind of guide to thinking through the ways of sin, that we separate ourselves from God.ⁱⁱ

We race through the list.

>The sin of anger, yes, that pegs me. I have been angry. It is something that I wrestle with. There's a call for repentance there.

>The sin of pride, yes, I have committed that.

>The sin of lust, yes. All of them ring true.

> Of Greed. Uh-huh.

➤ Gluttony. For sure.

➤ Envy. Yes.

> The sin of sloth -- sloth? Perhaps not sloth. Perhaps this is one area in which we have nothing to repent of, because if anything, many of us ARE busy people! Scurrying from one appointment to another commitment...wearing out our cars and our gasoline budgets at a furious pace; not getting enough rest. What does it feel like to get a good night's sleep?

But sloth goes beyond laziness...

As a lad, Bruno Bettelheim lived in Germany and at that time the Nazi terror was starting to move through Germany, and the signs were clear that it was going to engulf Bettelheim and his Jewish family. He wrote a book called *The Informed Heart*.ⁱⁱⁱ He tells in that book how he and his peers pleaded with the elder people to flee Germany, run away, because this terror was at their door. But the more they pleaded the more the old people said, "No, we can't leave our possessions, we can't leave our homes, we're settled here." And this went on week after week until finally the young people left and the Nazi terror came and swallowed up those Jews and killed them.

This is an example of sloth.

Sloth is what we name that sin... when one knows that one is setting upon an inadequate course, and insufficient course, when one can't summon the energy for stirring out of our everyday routines, that courage to move in a new, wholesome direction.

>The woman who detests her job but continues in it for a lifetime anyway exhibits sloth.

>The man who sits in front of the computer screen and pursues online relationships rather than real-life relationships, because real life relationships harder, because they demand more, is expressing sloth

>The married couple whose marriage itself is a lifelong hell, but who do nothing about it --

>The teenager who passively allows his friends to lead him into paths of alcohol or illegal drugs or unhealthy sexual relationships -- is guilty of sloth.

>They all know that they are not living up to their potential, that they are copping out. They know it's destructive behavior but they don't bring themselves to change, to repent.

And all of these claim the same defense... the same defense that you and I claim. If you ask us point blank WHY we don't move in the more healthy directions that we can easily name, we'll answer with an angry retort:

>I stay in this job, because my family needs the money, and there just isn't anything else....

>I stay in this marriage because I promised I would...there's nothing that'll make it better... and my son, you know, my son. He needs me. If I'm not here with them who'll cook his food and clean his clothes.

“How old is you son?”

“28.”

Hmm.

We're guilty of sloth when we feel continually oppressed, but when we refuse to do anything to really change our situation, and when we come up with what seem marvelously moral reasons for why we should stay just that awful way.

So here we are. Even sloth.... Yes, even that names us. All the seven capital sins.... They name us.

And here is John, challenging us to give up the old way that is so familiar, that fits us like a glove. And his message...

“There is a whole new way of living... of being... that God wants for all of us. But first, we have to give up that which is standing in the way of God's gift. It is not that we – in our own meager strength – will make the

change. But in our honest REPENTING – TURNING, is God’s opening to do that holy work.

This is the Gospel. This is the Good News of the Christmas season, and every season. Praise be to God!

ⁱ This sermon is relies in its thrust and a fair amount of its content on a particularly moving sermon, *Prophet John* by Rev. W. Bausch in a book that I no longer recall.

ⁱⁱ For a concise listing see, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_deadly_sins

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Informed Heart: Autonomy In a Mass Age*, Bruno Bettelheim. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960.