

“Repaint! Repaint! And Thin No More!”

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The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, December 9, 2007

Sermon Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Let us pray. Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now many of you have noted my title, and you know what’s coming. You’ve heard it before. I suggest that you just bite down hard or hold the hand of someone next to you, and we’ll get through it together. It’s a terrible, corny old story, but that’s where we’re going to start.

Once a member of a small country church won the contract to paint his own church, and he was out there Monday, and had his paint, but nobody was there to supervise him, and he thought about it. He thought, “If I thin my paint down a bit, I’ll have enough left to do this job and then with the other paint I bought, I can paint my own house and my fence. I’m going to spread this stuff out.” So he put a couple of quarts of water into his paint and thinned it out. He finished one side that way. Then he went to the second side of the church, and still there was nobody there to supervise him so he thinned it a little bit more. He thought, “My goodness, I’m going to use about a third of the paint I bought. I’m going to save so much money. I’m going to have so much left over.” He started thinking of all the plusses. He went around to the third side, and he started to thin it even more when all of a sudden, a storm broke loose, and the rain came down, and this puny, thin paint he’d put up just washed right off. All of it washed right off. Then with the thunder from Heaven, there came a voice from above saying, “Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more!” I told you we would get through it.

John the Baptist, there is a reason we have him here.

Another story. A woman boarded a train for the first time in her life, and she wanted to enjoy it perfectly so she walked up and down the aisle several times to find the perfect seat. She fussed with her baggage, and got it just perfectly suited above. She fumbled with the window to get just exactly the right amount of air. She played with the shade until she got the light just right. Finally, she took off her hat, and she looked around and found a place where it would be safe no matter what. She put it there. Just as she did that, the conductor announced that they had arrived at the destination! As she got off the train, she said to herself, if I had known that the trip, my first trip, was going to be so short, I wouldn’t have spent so much time fussing over trivial things.

A simple story, but a good one for today because it neatly sums up the Advent message we need to hear and to take our time with all the parts of Advent, the preparing and the repentance and the hope and the peace before we are ready to celebrate Christmas. It also reminds us just how short this ride of life is as well. The trip we’re on is short. Repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand says John the Baptist in today’s Gospel lesson. He was telling his followers to turn their lives around, to stop fussing over trivial things, and start paying attention to the most important thing in life, that God has come, the kingdom of Heaven is dawning. The Messiah has come. The Savior is in our midst. Pay

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attention! He has come to baptize you not just with water for repentance, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Fire to burn out those things, which hold you back and hold you down and separate you, and the Holy Spirit, who will guide you and empower you to truly love and connect with God and with each other. He has come to introduce you to a whole new way of life. The Savior has come.

He has come to show you the way toward becoming the uniquely beautiful person God made you to be, and so repent. Repent! In a moment, we'll spell out that repent probably doesn't mean what you think it does. It has a much deeper and richer meaning. No matter how you interpret it, have you ever gotten a Christmas card with the word repent on it? Probably not. I never have. You see them saying Merry Christmas, love, and joy and peace, but never repent, not once. It is a part of the preparation. It is a part of the hope that we have in Christ.

I know that we're all busy with all the other important things this time of year, and John the Baptist sort of is an intruder, an intruder with a long beard and a camel hair girdle and a matted locust bits and honey around the side. He's been living in the woods and eating those. We don't want him as a part of our Christmas. We want to decorate. We want to have lights and gifts and shopping lists and things we want and things we've gotten to surprise others. We think that's how we get ready for Christmas!

If we really want to be ready for the Christ whose birth we celebrate this month, we'll need to step away from the bright lights in the stores, away from the places of money and power, and stand in the dusty wilderness with this creature in the itchy camel hair vest, snacking on bugs, and listen to his sermon. Repent why? Because the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. It is such a strange message to be sure for a gray and cold December day.

Clarence Jordan wrote The Cotton Patch Gospel, and many of you are familiar with his writings and his life. He wrote a sermon once entitled “Metamorphosis.” It gives insight into the real meaning, the depth of the word “repentance.” In that sermon, Clarence Jordan actually says the word repent, and repentance is not a good translation from what's in the original Greek. He says that most people think repentance means you're sorry when you got caught doing something you weren't supposed to be doing. Well, that's not it. That's not what John is talking about.

The Greek word that John the Baptist used here, metanoia, Clarence Jordan says that it's hard to translate into English, but it's easier to understand if you look at an English word you do, metamorphosis, which is related, a similar Greek root. Meta meaning change, and morpha meaning form. Repentance really means that we are to change. We are to turn away from the direction we are going, and change direction. We are to change our life so that we become someone and something new. We all know what metamorphosis is. It's when we have a caterpillar that, you know, changes completely in the cocoon, and comes out a butterfly.

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By the way, have you ever heard the story about two caterpillars walking along the ground? One caterpillar says to the other. They see a butterfly flying overhead. One caterpillar says, “You’d never get me up in one of those things!”

Some of you are saying I’ll never change. People never change. The Gospel says you can. We can change. Repentance does mean change. John is saying (1) You need to change and (2) Jesus is coming to give you an example and the power to change into what God intended your life to be. To truly be able to love, not just act loving. To truly feel compassion, not just act compassionate. To truly be forgiving, not just say the words, I forgive you, but to forgive your brother, your sister from the heart.

It is presuming that we are not what we should be, and if we look at ourselves carefully we know we are not what we should be. We are always changing in one direction or another, whether we like it or not.

How many of you remember or went to your last high school or college reunion? Just raise your hands. Okay. Did you see all those old people? I went to my 30th. I could not believe how many old people were there. It was disgusting. I don’t think I’ll go back to the next one. I just don’t feel a kinship with those old people!

We’re always changing. We’re always changing. Repentance means changing in a particular direction, changing Godward. The direction is toward God. Take a long, hard look in the mirror, and see that we are far different from what we would like to be. We have fallen short. We have missed the mark. We have sinned against God. We have sinned against ourselves. We have sinned against others. We need to change.

Once we’ve acknowledge that, that we are sinners in need of forgiveness and reconciliation, we have to move to the second phase, the actual repentance, the turning, the turning. I will not ask you to raise your hand, but some of you may feel guilty about something even in this moment. We all do have some old things. Sin wants us to stay caught in the past wallowing in guilt, wallowing in shame. Sin wants us wallowing in the disappointment we’ve been to parents or teachers or others or to ourselves. Sin chains us to the past. Repentance means to turn away from the shame, and accept God’s forgiveness, and become new.

Many of us have strained relationships. Don’t raise your hand. Many of us feel still the scathing words of a colleague or the lies or the betrayal of a teacher or a friend or a spouse or a parent or a sibling. Maybe we remember the eyes of a beggar we passed by and pretended not to notice. We all have things to get beyond.

John the Baptist was a sign of our need for forgiveness and for reconciliation. Forgiveness within and reconciliation with others, and so when he baptized people, he would baptize them for repentance and forgiveness of sins. Now, it was not a Christian baptism. It was not in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It was the old Jewish baptism that was done when someone was caught doing flagrantly against the

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rules, and they were ritually impure. They were ritually cleansed. Or if you were Gentile converting to Judaism, among other things, you would be baptized. You can imagine how angry these orthodox Pharisees and Sagisees were when he was there offering baptism, and they came, and he sort of looked at them like, “And you, too?” He didn’t want them to be warned, but he did say, and you, too, need to be baptized. They thought, what? Me? I’m a Pharisee! A son of Pharisee! A Sagisee! We’re third generation Sagisee! What do I have to be forgiven of?

That reminds me of an old Peanuts comic strip. Lucy was walking along down the road with Charlie Brown, and Charlie Brown asks her, “Are you going to make any New Year’s resolutions?” Lucy instantly just hits the roof and she yells at him and knocks him off his feet. She says, “What? What for? What’s wrong with me now? I like myself the way I am! Why should I change? What in the world is the matter with you, Charlie Brown? I’m all right the way that I am! I don’t need to improve! How could I improve? I ask you, how?”

Some of us don’t understand the need for repentance because we don’t think there is anything wrong. That seems to be the spirit of our age.

At the end of the Battle of Gettysburg after a great slaughter of troops, the army staggering under a horrible defeat and loss, Robert E. Lee said to his staff, “I take complete responsibility for this whole defeat. All of this is my fault.” Contrast that response by Lee with almost any leader of our day. People die. Wars are started. Economies ruined. Laws are broken. The most we hear is mistakes were made. Made by whom? Mistakes were made. It is a nice modern way of appearing to confess without really taking any responsibility. Keeping it at arm’s length through poor syntax. Mistakes were made.

John the Baptist was saying repent of your personal sin, and you know what they are. Turn from them. Receive forgiveness for them, and turn toward God, and don’t go back to them. We need to do, all of us, what the Alcoholics Anonymous program calls a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. A searching and fearless moral inventory.

Now, I close with an illustration about Terry Anderson. Some of you may remember him. He’s probably the best known of the American hostages kept in Lebanon about 20 years ago now. Anderson was a journalist, and he was held hostage for 2,454 days. That’s years and years. His ordeal began innocently. In 1985, he was playing tennis, and then all of a sudden, three young men came charging out of their car as he was leaving the court. In a flash, they got him, and said, “I will shoot you if you try to move.” They pressed up against the back of the seat of a Mercedes, and they drove off with him, and they had the gun. In the first days of his captivity, it was appalling. He was blindfolded. He was held in chains. He was interrogated roughly. His mind did not know how to react. He said he was on the edge of madness. He was losing control, the capacity to think. He said, “I cannot do this anymore! You are treating me like an animal! I am a

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human being!” When asked what he wanted, he requested a Bible. Not long afterwards, a heavy object landed on his bed. He pulled down his blindfold. It was a Bible. He began to read in Genesis, something he hadn’t done in a very long time. Terry Anderson had been raised in the Catholic Church, and even though he had not been a practicing Catholic for years, the Bible came to him as a gift from Heaven. He had nothing else to do with his time, but introspection and to read Scripture. Introspection, look at himself, and read Scripture. He pondered his life. He had lots of time to ponder his life. He began a litany of confession in his mind as he looked at himself honestly. He confessed that he had hurt his first wife and daughter very badly. He’d made many, many mistakes. He had been very arrogant to others. He wasn’t sure that people liked him much. He wasn’t sure that he liked himself. Later, in the first year of his captivity, he became aware of other hostages, and in the next room was a priest, Father Lawrence Genko from Joliet. Anderson asked his captors if he could see the priest. He said, “I am a Catholic, and I need to make a confession.” His wish was granted. Father Genko came into his room. They both took off their blindfolds, and Anderson hardly knew where to begin. It had been 25 years since his last confession. Father Genko was encouraging, and Anderson began reciting the sins that he’d been reflecting upon for a year, and there was much to confess. A bad marriage to chasing women to drinking excessively, Anderson found it a very emotional and cleansing experience. When he finished, both he and Father Genko were in tears. The priest then laid his right hand upon Anderson’s head, and said, “In the name of gentle loving God, you are forgiven.” Terry Anderson’s faith deepened immensely during his hostage years. Long hours of self-reflection culminating in this moment of confession when Father Genko was his first step.

Ironically, it was his captivity that provided him the opportunity to face his personal demons so that he could be set free of them. It was his chance to turn around, to metamorphose, to become something new in a new direction, and to become a new person.

Turn around. That’s what repentance means. Turn around and become something new, a new direction, a new goal, a new heart, a new mind, a new reason for living. That’s what repentance means. To be going one way, but then change towards and turn around go another, a better way towards God. That is what John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness prior to Jesus’ arrival. A baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. John was saying that God is coming, and if you would like to get ready for that, to meet your God, you have to change your ways. You have to turn around. You must repent, and be something different in a different direction with a different reason for being.

There is hope in that. This is not a hellfire and damnation sermon, which John the Baptist could easily be preached as, but I think wrongly. It is hope. It is hope. Recognizing that we all fall short of even our own standards much less God’s, that we all hurt others, and we all hurt ourselves much less the ideal that God has for our lives. We need forgiveness. In God in Christ, we have it. We need the power to forgive, and through God’s holy spirit, we have it. We need the ability to be compassionate if we are

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to relate to others and love them, as they are, imperfect as we are, and through God’s spirit, we can love that way. We can forgive that. We can be new people.

So the message is one when we hear of repentance not of drudgery and counting your sins, and saying I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. It is a message of hope. We can change. We can be forgiven. We can change the direction of our lives. God has allowed that. God has enabled that through coming to us in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God for the hope and the peace we have in him. Amen.