



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 2 Year A

Repent, Live into God's Dream

[RCL]: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” - Romans 15: 13

In every age when God's people turn to sin and waywardness, human prophets appear to sound warnings of what is to come unless humanity changes its course. They may be humble, untutored individuals like Amos, the sheep farmer of the eighth century B.C., they may be learned public figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or wild creatures driven by some inner fire. We usually think of prophecy as foretelling the future – predictions of things to come. But the biblical meaning of prophecy is the declaration of religious truth, speaking as the voice of God.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we find ourselves once again on the banks of the River Jordan with John the Baptist. All four Gospel writers agree that there is no good news – no Gospel of Jesus, without John the Baptist. Jesus himself describes John as the greatest of prophets. John took his mission, which was to declare the imminent arrival of the coming Messiah, very seriously.

John feared no one, not even Herod or Herod's wife, who in the end arranged to have John's head. He was, however, totally devoted to the One for whom he came to prepare the way, saying to his followers, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” It would be hard to envision John on the cover of any fashion magazine. This wild figure dressed in camel's hair would more likely be depicted as a cartoon image holding a sign that reads, “Get ready, the end is near!”

John proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Crowds from Jerusalem and the surrounding regions flock to hear John and to be baptized in the Jordan. Why do they flock to hear John? Perhaps they have become disheartened by the quality of their lives and welcome the call for change. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan point out that the Biblical understanding of the term “repent” is deeply shaped by the Jewish experience of exile. To repent, to return, is to follow the prepared way of the

Lord that leads out of our separation and back into reconnection with the God who made us and loves us beyond our understanding.

John is out in the wilderness – far away from the places of power. He sees the world through the lens of wilderness experience and calls to mind the fact that God’s people endured the wilderness – with all its confusions, ill-will, and foolishness – as they fled from Pharaoh’s tyranny. For years, they struggled with God’s call on their lives, often abusing it with their own disobedience. This is a man who won’t stop reminding people of the reality of faithlessness despite all that comes from God’s gracious leading. He risks the traumas the wilderness may bring. The wilderness is a place where death is all too close – where food is scarce. No wonder his staples are locusts and wild honey. Perhaps venturing into the wilderness to be with John reminds the crowd of their ancestors’ struggles, allowing them to hear John’s call to repent more as invitation than judgment – as an invitation to come home.

To repent doesn’t mean to simply be sorry. In the New Testament, to repent means to begin seeing differently, to begin thinking differently, both of which lead to acting and living differently. To repent is to change, but not for the sake of change itself. Rather, when we change, we start to live differently, because as we enter a new mindset or as we develop a new way of seeing, we become aware that our actions are out of step with God’s dream for all creation.

And what is God’s dream for all creation? The answer to that question can be found throughout Scripture. One illustration can be found in our reading from Isaiah – God’s dream is for the world to be a place in which peace and equity – rather than fear and hatred – rule the day. God dreams for the world to be a place where we view each other with compassion and with love, where all of creation is full of the mercy and the peace of God. Dr. King dreamed of the Beloved Community. Catherine Meeks, Director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, reminds us that God dreams of community where we love one another as neighbors with all our heart, soul, and mind, and that God calls us to live into this dream, not next year, not ten years from today, but right now.

It is a desire that John himself expresses with the phrase that always comes after the verb “*repent*.” He does not just shout, “Repent!” and then stop there; John links the call to repentance with the “why” of repentance: the kingdom of heaven has come near. For those of us who follow God in the Way of Love, it is Jesus who defines our new way of seeing, our new mindset, and our way back to God. Deciding to try to live and love like Jesus is what Christian repentance is all about.

Could it be that our rugged, ascetic nonconformist was not yelling with a tone of dread and doom, but with an equally intense voice filled with hope? Beloved, what if we choose to hear John’s call - *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near* – not as an ominous threat of impending condemnation, but as an invitation to live into God’s dream?

Even now, there are prophets rising up in our midst. Our youth dream of having a future in which they can enjoy God’s creation, but often feel that their dreams are threatened because of climate change and

violence. They are demanding change to protect their lives and God's creation so they and their children may enjoy the abundant life God desires for them - that they may live into God's dream. The vulnerable simply can't afford to be indifferent, "and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6b).

God invites us all to dream something beyond what we can presently see – the suffering of migrants, of refugees, the homeless, the hungry, and those who have lost loved ones through acts of violence. These are dreams by which to set a course. God does not ask us if we are there yet, but rather whether we are headed in the right direction.

We, as children of God, need to heed the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness – the voice that reminds us of God's dream. We need to take the time to seek God's vision for us – to ask, "What does God want us to be and to do?" We need to choose one – just one, for now – element of our lives where we see the need for repentance and take advantage of the opportunity to change direction.

Following Paul's counsel, we who have glimpsed God's dream must now share that hope. Like John, we must strive to renew the hopes of an exhausted world. With practice, we can be like Isaiah, who can see beyond the mess and dream of a world in which all are ready for the arrival of God.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." - "Repent, live into God's Dream." This is John the Baptist's invitation for us to come home and to be the people God has created us to be. Amen.

The Rev. Marcea Paul is Curate for Pastoral Care at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, Austin, Texas. She also serves on the Texas Pauli Murray Scholarship Committee. She earned a Master of Divinity degree from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018. Prior to attending seminary, Marcea had a career as an accountant and also served as Parish Administrator at St. Faith's Episcopal Church, Cutler Bay, Florida.