

Text: Matthew 3: 1-12  
Title: Repentance  
Date: 12.08.19  
Roger Allen Nelson

On a lovely morning in London, Sandi and I paid homage to Lord Nelson in Trafalgar Square and wandered down Downing Street. We had fish and chips with nattily attired businessmen, gawked at Big Ben, and saw where kings were buried and queens were married. The city was colorful and cosmopolitan, bustling with commuters, cabbies, sightseers, Muslims in burqas, Bobbies and protesters camped out in a tent city across the street from Parliament.

That afternoon we went to Westminster Abbey for an evensong service. The music was ethereal, the liturgy echoed back through the centuries, and those gathered for worship were Anglo, African, Asian and American. There were women with oversized shopping bags who left once the choir sang and an oversized-college-age-chap who kept his pants slung so low that every time he sat down I had a clear view of both hemispheres. Next to me a woman, who came straight from work, settled into the stillness of the service as if breathing for the first time that day.

The flow of worship was familiar and as is the tradition we stood for the gospel lesson. The priest climbed the pulpit steps and began to read. I closed my eyes....

And standing there, in the middle of a busy and indifferent world, I was startled, dislocated, and suddenly somehow overwhelmed. Because, as best I can describe, it was an alien voice. Not because of the lilt of the priest's accent, but alien because it was strange, upside-down, unruly, counter-cultural, odd, beautiful, earthy, true. I don't remember the text but I do remember that it pulled me in and shook me, confronted and comforted me, healed, awakened, and offered hope, and....

And, for few moments there was a glimpse of another kingdom – a new creation being birthed – and while the voice was alien to the discourse of politics, commerce, vacation and protest it was also timeless and truer than all of that transient noise.

And, I wanted more of that vision,  
more of that kingdom,  
more of that alien voice....

John the Baptist is an alien voice.

Dressed in a hair shirt, with breath of stale insects and a hint of honey, he's not the sort of character you want showing up at the company Christmas party. If he's included in your neighbor's Christmas creche he's up on the roof next to Santa's sleigh. Like a street preacher with a bullhorn he disrupts polite conversation, frightens children, scares away customers, and upsets the conventional appplecart.

But, John the Baptist had a flair for religious theater. Our text reads that people streamed out into the desert to see his spiritual sideshow. They went out to hear an alien voice. And to those who suffered under Roman occupation, to those who were strangers in their own land, he belted the

hope that God was coming and that the kingdom was at hand. Therefore, Matthew links John's voice to Isaiah's proclamation of God's coming. Listen to a little bit more of Isaiah...

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for....*

*A voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, and every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged place a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken...*

John is announcing a glad homecoming. After a long wait God is coming and a displaced people are going to parade home. So, clear the streets, strike up the band, put on your dancing shoes! And, what was true about release from Babylonian captivity 500 years earlier would now be true of a release from Roman captivity.

God is coming!  
God has come before.  
God is coming again.  
Let us prepare a way.

But....

But, then John looks up from the river, sees the fine and the faithful coming to see what all the fuss is about, and he spits and sputters out a warning,

*You bunch of snakes! Who told you to slither down here to the river? Don't think for a minute that a little water on your slimy-snake-skins will make a difference! It's your heart that has to change not your skin! Oh! And don't try pulling rank as a descendant of Abraham ~ they're a dime a dozen. God could turn these river stones into the children of Abraham. And your religious credentials? Ooooh, we're so impressed! What matters is the fruit of your life. The axe is being sharpened. The dead wood is gonna burn. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is coming!*

John couples God's coming with repentance.

The Lord will sort things out and make things right, but in preparation straighten up what's crooked, wash what's dirty, and repent of what's wrong. We await God's coming, but given the monstrous mess we've made of things repentance is necessary.

My therapist/friend sits in his office – with his legs crossed, a new Ironman tattoo, and a venti cup of coffee – and listens to people's stories. He is particularly skilled at asking questions that allow new ways of thinking to emerge. I'm sure that he gives advice – sometimes telling people to try this and come back and we'll talk about what happened – but most of the time he trusts that  
as people sit with their stories,  
as the Spirit works,  
as they listen to their lives,

as truth surfaces,  
healing will be possible.

He told me that a lot of clients, especially young people, enter therapy in pursuit of a solution to a problem; and when they find a workable solution they quit therapy. Therapy, for them, is a pragmatic tool.

But he thinks that the real gift is when people sit long enough, and listen close enough, to slowly peel back the layers and sort through the lies they believe about themselves. He knows that it takes time to tell the truth and to learn how to live with the inherent tensions – the dark and the light, the contradictions, the blessings and curses – that make up who we are. He knows that learning to hold all the fragments of our lives as some manner of integrated whole can be a slow difficult process.

Dear friends, repentance is, in part, listening to our lives; peeling back the layers, to own or hold the whole of who we are. Eugene Peterson writes about it this way:

*Repentance.... is deciding that you have been told a pack of lies about yourself and your neighbor and your world. And it is deciding that God in Jesus Christ is telling you the truth. Repentance is a realization that what God wants from you and what you want from God are not going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts.*

In that way repentance is not just a matter of religious niceties, or dredging up remorse for how we've screwed up, but it is learning to own the truth of who we are and respond in kind to the calling of God. In a word, *metanoia*, turning around, thinking anew, discarding lies, changing vision, and living toward the truth.

And while that's not easy when it's personal, it is imaginable.

In our company this morning there are those who know what it's like to tell the truth about themselves and turn toward sobriety, or a healthier marriage, or healing from abuse, etc, etc. Thanks be to God.

But what about repentance that is corporate?

How do we repent for our complicity in structures and cultures that are racist or sexist?  
How do we repent for our role in having polluted and plundered this good earth?  
How do we repent when we're the beneficiaries of systems that engage in mass incarceration and the destruction and displacement of cultures and peoples?  
How do we, as Tish Harrison Warren describes,

*...lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right and the incompleteness we find in the meantime. We dwell in a world still racked with conflict, violence, suffering, darkness. Advent holds space for our grief, and it reminds us that all of us, in one way or another, are not only wounded by the evil in the world but are also wielders of it....*

It seems to me that repentance includes asking hard questions and listening long enough to get to honest answers. In a polarized-politically-charged-world, that traffics in disinformation and lies and easy-offense, getting to some semblance of truth is hard work. Listening to the voices of others, listening to the experience of those on the margins, listening without defensiveness or dismal but in humility and with a willingness to learn and change is slow work. But, it is part of repentance. It is part of preparing the way for the coming of God....

Dear friends, the call to quiet reflection in the middle of the season's hustle and bustle is not an alien idea, you can find that on the Hallmark channel, and that's not the gospel. It would be so much easier to rush ahead in the expectation of love and light and all things merry and bright, but that's not the gospel. We could pass over or ignore the reality of creation's brokenness and humanity's evil, but that's not the gospel. The gospel is a call to repentance. An alien voice.

When I was accosted by the gospel in that London cathedral it wasn't fear that took hold of my heart, it was a glimpse of the coming kingdom of God. When John sputters out accusations against those who wandered out to the river he doesn't begin with threat or damnation; he begins with the line, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

We are called to repentance not out of fear but out of the imagination of a kingdom where "the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind; and the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind." We're called to repentance not simply to slap on a new coat of religious paint or muster up the requisite sorrow for not being good enough and then promise to do better, but repentance is getting to the truth of who we are because there's "no place where earth's sorrows are more keenly felt than heaven; there is no place where earth's failings have such gracious judgement given." Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

*Jesus is the judge, yes, but his chambers are the chambers of his compassionate heart. No judgment takes place outside of there; all judgment takes place inside of there, by the same Lord who offers us peace, pardon, and transformation every day of our lives. We can refuse him, of course. We can fail to believe him, we can fear him, we run away from him. Or we can say yes, here I am, see me the way that I really am, tell me the whole truth about myself, refine me, transform me, baptize me with the Holy Spirit and with fire and damn the torpedoes. I give up trying to figure out how good or bad I am. I give up trying to be God. You be the judge. You be God. You have better credentials anyway.*

God is coming.

*Repent for the kingdom of God has come near.*

Amen.