

Matthew 3:1-12  
A New Map  
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"I think we just have to go a little bit further. We gotta be close."

Four childhood friends, now in our 40's, were backpacking for three days in the Cascade Mountains outside of Seattle. We'd been carrying fifty pound backpacks for ten hours up a mountain and we could not seem to reach our destination, Robin's Lake.

Tony, my brother, has had surgeries to both of his knees, needed to stop every 5 minutes, leaning against trees and sitting on boulders.

Exhausted and hurting, he shot angry glances at Joel, who had organized the trip.

Joel took a deep breath and reached into his pocket, unfolded a crinkled old map of the route that his father-in-law had given him.

He laid it down on the ground and we all hovered over it, looking at it the way guys who know nothing about cars or motors pop their hoods open and stare at the engine when the car breaks down.

He put his finger on the map and traced the trail forward finally stopping and tapping his finger at a place that looked as good as any, he faked confidence....

"Here. This is it. Yeah. I think we just keep going a little bit further.....to here." He tapped the same spot on the map again.

We nodded with little hope and lots of skepticism.

We picked our backpacks up again and trudged down the trail, when a scraggly bearded man in a flannel shirt and tan pants came hiking from the other direction towards us.

Joel, who just a seconds ago was very confident that we were going the right direction, asked the man, "Do you know if we are on the path to Robbin's Lake?"

He handed his map to the man who reached into his own backpack and pulled out a little leather-bound journal.

It looked like an old Baptist preacher's bible, tattered and worn with notes, and notes about notes, highlights, drawings, and something like a woven prayer cloth in between the pages.

Thumbing through his journal he made a series of "hmmmmms" and "ahhhh I sees."

He knelt down and placed his journal on top of our map.

"You have an old map—it doesn't show the washed out old bridge or the new bridge or Tucker's trail.

You have to turn around and go back about 3 miles, then go about 4-5 more miles up the mountain after that. It's tough scrambling but you should make it there before sundown."

The old map was no good. Somewhere along the way we missed our turn or took a wrong turn and just kept going.

In order to get back on the path that we set out for we needed to turn around and reorient ourselves with a new map that this stranger had scribbled for us.

I wonder if you've ever made a wrong turn in life and gone so far down the trail you don't where you are or where you are even going anymore.

Or maybe you didn't even know you were on the wrong path—patterns, habits, ways of being, and being in relationship and community became so ingrained that you didn't even know a different way existed.

One wrong turn years ago and here you are, map laid out on the ground, finger retracing where you been, trying to figure out how you got so far off the trail, where you need to go, and wondering if you can ever get back on the trail

I wonder if you have ever heard the call to repent.

Not just feeling bad for mistakes and hurts you've caused, but a call to turn and reorient life, priorities, and values towards a different way of being.

John the Baptist enters the biblical story in the tradition of Old Testament prophets, an eccentric sent by God to let the people know that somewhere along the way they had made a wrong turn and that the time is now to turn around.

Outside of town, he stands ankle deep in *an ancient River bottom that's seen this kind of thing more than you could imagine* shouting out “Repent!” to all who travel from Judea and Jerusalem to hear him.

Repent meaning...turn around, go a different way, reorient yourself.

“Turn! This is not who God called you to be!”

But to cry out “turn” means nothing if there is nothing to turn towards or turn to.

Lost on a backpacking trip the turning is obvious—you turn around and go back the way you came until you find the road you missed and you turn towards your destination.

But where does John the Baptist and Matthew's gospel want their listeners to turn from? Where are they called to turn to?

Thomas Long writes,

"Repentance is impossible, unless one is given a new way to perceive what is true and real. If John the Baptist had only cried, 'Repent!' he would have been wasting his breath.

*People do not simply turn from one way of life; they do so when they turn towards something deeper and truer.*

John gives then the location to turn towards for when he also cries,

'The Kingdom of God is near.'

The old order of things is burning away but in the birth of Jesus, the new way is here."

Turn from the illusions and trappings of this world; turn towards God's Kingdom in flesh and blood—Jesus.

I came to Roseland Christian Ministries in 2000 as a 21-year-old college intern. Doe eyed, impressionable, but with a loooooong naughty streak in me—I was just a kid when I moved into 237 West 109th Place with DeWitt Casey, David Palmer, Lisa Jennings and her 2-year-old son Ernest.

I started to hang around the center, attending morning prayers, afterschool club, driving seniors on outings, and more.

Sometimes I would just hang in the Drop-In Center. 60-80 men and women would be at Drop-In Center lunch.

One of those first months I had met a woman who would eat lunch here named Winnifred Shine.

She had a twin sister named Wilma.

Winnifred was living on the streets but it seemed from the little I talked with her that she came from a good home just down a few blocks.

That summer there was a number of women on the street who were getting killed and left in vacant buildings and lots—sometimes not found until days after they were killed.

When these women went missing and when their bodies were recovered, they were never mentioned in the news.

Discarded in life. Passed over in death.

It was just a few years later when a blonde hair, blue eyed, young woman Natalie Holloway went missing in the Caribbean creating a national crisis concerning her whereabouts.

The contrast between the value of black lives and her white life could not have been clearer.

That's not being political. It's just the truth.

Winifred went missing that summer and eventually her body was found in an alley dumpster.

A few days after she had died, her mother came to RCM where she met with Rev. Tony and Ms. Harts, looking for a place to do the funeral.

What didn't hit me until 20 years later was that looking for a physical space/place was really secondary.

They were looking for a people who believed and lived as if Winnifred's life mattered. A people who believe that Winnifred counted as one made in God's image.

The funeral was held in the room right behind us.

I sat in the back with a homeless man I had just met a month earlier named Oliver Evans.

The room was packed with a colorful cast of characters—Skinner, Smoky, Will Gordon, Porsha Davis, Pop-Man.

The forgotten and abandoned came out in numbers for their own. Some unwashed and others in three-piece suits.

An older man came in with a large vintage suitcase in hand, he walked down the center aisle, up to the front just off a few feet from the pulpit and the coffin.

He pulled up two chairs to the front of the church and had them facing each other. He sat in one chair and he laid down his suit case in the other, he clicked opened up the suit case, which turned into a little portable organ.

He turned some knobs, and his hand gently touched the keyboard until he found the key he was looking for.

It didn't get a lot of volume but we all heard it.

"If anybody asks you where I'm going...where I'm going...soon. I'm going up yonder."

Winnifred's mom processed into the room through the double doors.

Stoic and steel faced, showing no emotion, she made her way to the casket where her daughter lay.

She turned her head to a slant and stared, and then all that hurt and pain pushed out of her, her head shook back and forth.

Finally she could hold it in no more and she let out a wail as he body gave way to the agony.

Family rushed to her side and held onto her elbows tightly as her knees buckled and her legs came out from under her.

A great crowd of people came to her and helped her sit and wiped tears away as the funeral started.

For the next 2 hours, there were testimonies and more testimonies and words of encouragement from community members.

Rev. Tony preached.

Steve Turner sang, "Jesus Loves Me."

When the funeral ended everyone gathered next door and shared a meal.

There were stories, songs, scripture, and let's call the fried chicken, corn bread, and greens that day a sacrament.

In the middle of all this poverty and pain there was so much life, energy, and love.

There was so much attention and intention from the preacher, the organist, the cooks, friends giving the testimony—the community.

To the world Winnifred was a South Side prostitute. Her life and death not even worth a mention on the nine o'clock news.

To this community she was a child of God to be wept over, sang for, and celebrated.

On that day, sitting in the back row of that funeral, I heard a call to a different life.

I was offered a new map.

Any other map or life plan was out the window that day.

There was a turning away from one life and a turning towards another.

I believe the call was to Jesus and a faith community.

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We are only a few weeks away from advent. Now I'm not trying to rush the season. But, in the season of advent we are invited to turn again towards Jesus and wait.

To turn again towards the Kingdom of God.

In this season of Advent we are invited to imagine what Jesus means for our community, for Hope Christian Reformed Church, and for who we are as a people.

Could we, Hope CRC and I'm saying "we" begin to reimagine your place in the reality of God's Kingdom here and now.

Maybe that means turning around from some habits and practices and going down a different road with a different map that has taken you to where you are.

Maybe it means following that call or following that map into God's redemptive work in the world in a new way that was never expected before.

Whatever that may look like for you.

Earlier I quoted a guy I like a lot named Thomas Long, who wrote a book about preaching that I read in seminary.

Here's something from another person I read a long time ago too—he didn't write books about preaching but what he did write sure preaches;

"To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'" (Beuchner)

John is calling upon people to realize that the old order has passed away and the new one has come.

He wants his followers to redefine the way they see reality, to embrace the radical vision that God—not money, power, status, fear, disease, death, or any other power—rules the world.

His words for this are—"the Kingdom of God has drawn near."

In Christ, the old order has passed away—and a new order is breaking in all around us. We're being given new maps.

I don't know what that means for you.

I have something of a hunch of what it means for me. I'm pretty sure it means listening for the voice of God and being prepared to throw away the old maps, remaining open to the Spirit of God doing some new and surprising thing—that will probably leave you saying "Wow" and everyone who sees you following that map saying the same thing—wow!