

“Prepare the Way”
Matthew 3:1-12
Sunday, December 5, 2010
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

A number of years ago Sean Connery – remember Sean Connery? He is known especially for his string of James Bond movies – but he also did a movie called “The Name of the Rose.” It was a mystery movie about a string of murders which took place in a medieval monastery.

For some in the monastery, any form of book knowledge was viewed as sinful. Science and other intellectual pursuits were considered evil. Sean Connery played an educated monk from another monastery who acted as detective.

One scene in the movie was very brief and very vivid. It pictured a self-indulgent monk who ate too much, who broke the rules of sexual abstinence, and who read too many books from the secret library. It was late one night and the monk was in his cell. It was a dark little room with cold stone walls, lit by one candle. The monk was stripped to the waist even though it was the dead of winter. With tears of pain running down his face he flogged himself with a leather whip. The whip had multiple leather strands to it.

The monk kept throwing the whip over his shoulder, creating bloody red stripes on his back. This was his penance for the horrible sins he had committed.

Repentance is often thought of this way – as a painful, ugly behavior that only sick, guilt-ridden, emotionally unhealthy people participate in.

I. Prepare: No Flogging Required

Our scripture lesson for today describes John the Baptist somewhat in this way. He wears a camel hair shirt so that the rough fabric might scratch his skin and remind him of his need for repentance. He wanders in the wilderness eating only locusts and wild honey.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” he cries. Soon he will be executed by one of Herod’s guards. He is keenly aware of the seriousness and the urgency of his mission.

Superficial people come out from Jerusalem to see him. Pharisees and Sadducees – they are not interested in his message; they are simply entertained by his outlandish behavior and appearance.

They question him. He states, in a word, “Repent.”

I like how Susan R. Andrews thinks about John the Baptist. She writes:

“When our children were small, a nice church lady named Chris made them a child-friendly crèche. All the actors in this stable drama are soft and squishy and durable - perfect to touch and rearrange - or toss across the living room in a fit of toddler frenzy. The Joseph character has always been my favorite because he looks a little wild - red yarn spiking out from his head, giving him an odd look of energy. In fact, I have renamed this character John the Baptist and in my mind substituted one of the innocuous shepherds for the more staid and solid Joseph. Why this invention? Because, over the years, I have decided that without the disconcerting presence of John lurking in the shadows of our manger scenes, the Jesus story is mush - nothing but child's play, lulling us into sleepy sentimentality.”

John does not necessarily call all of us to eat locusts or wear camel hair shirts or live in the wilderness. That is the calling of the prophet. But his presence is, as Andrews says,

“disconcerting.” He “looks a little wild,” and his intent is certainly not to lull us “into sleepy sentimentality.”

Writes Martin Marty, “One critic said he had gone to many churches and heard the preacher say, ‘Don't try to impress God with your works’ or ‘Don't attempt to please God with your merits’ or ‘Don't try to keep the rules and regulations and thus win your way.’ He looked around at nearly slumbering collections of utterly casual Christians and wondered, ‘Who's trying?’ ”

John’s message is urgent. His message is serious. His message has a life and death quality to it. For him, personally, suffering and death is a part of his walk with Christ.

For us, John’s call is, “Repent.” And he defines that repentance. “Prepare the way of the Lord,” he says. “Make his paths straight.”

Through repentance we prepare the way for Christ to enter our hearts and our lives. We make the path straight for him to come to us. We open the doors and invite him in.

II. Prepare: Repent Joyfully

Repentance is serious business. It can also be joyful. Repentance is a choice we can celebrate. It can feel good, if we let it. It can sink into our souls and make us feel right.

It’s like that old joke about feeling so much better after I stop hitting myself on the head with a board. When we repent we make room in our lives to feel so much better. We stop hitting ourselves on the head with our sinful behaviors.

I think it’s helpful to picture sin this way, as an action we do in which we keep hurting ourselves. We beat ourselves on the head over and over again with sin. Maybe it’s that alcohol or drug problem or some other addictive behavior. Maybe it’s self-hatred that leads to violence

towards others or toward oneself. Maybe it's fear of taking risks. Maybe it's taking too many unnecessary risks. Maybe it's cheating others. Maybe it's cheating oneself.

Whatever our most secret, hidden sin, the point of repentance is to stop tormenting ourselves.

Pema Chodron is an American-born Buddhist nun. She has a new book out, entitled, The Three Commitments: Walking the Path of Liberation.

In a review of the book, Linda Douty writes, “Especially useful in this book are practical spiritual exercises that cut across all religious traditions. One example is a practice that Chodron calls, ‘The One-and-a half Minute Thing,’ which posits that any emotional surge – anger, impatience, judgment, and so forth – begins to lose its fire in ninety seconds. Her suggestion is to pause for that amount of time, not feed the emotion by repetition and *what ifs*, and simply be present to the feeling. This involves refraining from acting on the surge rather than repressing. Rather than focusing on blame, this pause allows a person to focus on the interior response to discern what it may have to teach. It also provides a way to deal with the reality that often our best teachers are the *troublemakers*. Seeing that I am “hooked” but not acting on it reminds me of the words of Jesus about loving the unlovable, ‘If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?’ (Lk 6:32).”

Douty continues with another spiritual exercise from Chodron's book, “A similar practice is described as *simmering* – a nonviolent practice that interrupts the upsetting story line and allows feelings to simmer instead of explode. Breathing into this practice, one can consider what to do to dissolve the seeds of uncomfortable feelings without running away and escaping discomfort. Chodron teaches that acting out of our anger usually escalates and invites others to do the same, and thus a deadly spiral begins.”

I offer these two spiritual exercises to you, free of charge, as a help to you and to me during the season of Advent. “The One-and-a-Half Minute Thing,” and “simmering.”

During the holidays there is often a lot of stress and grief and anger and all kinds of mixed-up feelings under the surface. I know these exercises will be a help to me. I want to use my “troublemaker” emotions as teachers, rather than as leather whips to hurt myself and others. I want to prepare the way of the Lord in a gentle, joyful way.

III. Prepare: Get off the Treadmill

Returning to the scene from “The Name of the Rose”: The image of the monk flogging himself is actually an image of sinfulness, not a picture of repentance. Night after night this monk beats himself, filled with self-hate. Day after day he commits the same acts for which he flogs himself each night. Unable to believe that God’s grace is meant for him, he feels he must somehow earn God’s love through punishing himself.

At Christmas time we remember that God loved us so much that “he gave his only begotten Son...” To repent joyfully means nothing more than to accept this love, believing it is meant for you. To repent joyfully means to step off the treadmill of sin, to stop the daily ritual of hurting yourself in ways large and small.

Brett Blair reminds us of a wonderful and humorous poem by Shel Silverstein, entitled, “Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take The Garbage Out!” It goes like this:

Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout
Would not take the garbage out!
She'd scour the pots and scrape the pans,
Candy the yams and spice the hams,
And though her Daddy would scream and shout
She simply would not take the garbage out.

And so it piled up to the ceilings:
Coffee grounds, potato peelings,
Brown bananas, rotten peas,
Chunks of sour cottage cheese.
It filled the can, it covered the floor,
It cracked the window and blocked the door
With bacon rinds and chicken bones,
Drippy ends of ice cream cones,
Prune pits, peach pits, orange peel,
Gloppy glumps of cold oatmeal,
Pizza crusts and withered greens,
Soggy beans and tangerines,
Crusts of black burned buttered toast,
Gristly bits of beefy roasts . . .

The garbage can rolled on down the hall,
It raised the roof, it broke the wall . . .
Greasy napkins, cookie crumbs,
Globs of gooey bubble gum,
Cellophane from green baloney,
Rubbery blubbery macaroni,
Peanut butter, caked and dry,
Curdled milk and crusts of pie,
Moldy melons, dried up mustard,
Eggshells mixed with lemon custard,
Cold french fries and rancid meat,
Yellow lumps of cream of wheat.

At last the garbage reached so high
That finally it touched the sky.
And all the neighbors moved away,
And none of her friends would come to play.

And finally Sarah Cynthia Stout
Said, "OK, I'll take the garbage out!"
But then, of course, it was too late . . .

The garbage reached across the state,
From New York to the Golden Gate.
And there, in the garbage she did hate,
Poor Sarah met an awful fate,
That I cannot right now relate
Because the hour is too late.
But children, remember Sarah Stout
And always take the garbage out!

Comments Blair, “We are all like Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout. We have not taken the garbage out. We keep our sins, as wretched as they may be, we will not get them out. The garbage of our sins, stinks up our lives. John the Baptist is our reminder: Repent and let Christ take the trash out of your life. Be baptised! Make straight paths for Him! Flee from the wrath to come! Produce fruit! This is Advent and this is its message.”

Closing.

John the Baptist is a voice in the wilderness telling us to repent, calling us to prepare the way of the Lord. In this Advent season of preparation for Christ’s coming, may we stop. May we just stop the hurtful things we do to ourselves and to each other. And when our sin feels so comfortable and so familiar that we feel we cannot stop, may the God who sent his Son send the Spirit to overcome our weakness.

As we receive Communion today, may we repent joyfully. May we prepare the way, in our hearts, to receive God’s love and power through Jesus Christ. Amen.