

Re-turn and Re-attach!

The Second Sunday of Advent
Vicar Kate Schroeder

December 9, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Matthew 3:1-12

Let us pray: Lord, we pray that you will help us to see beyond the boxes and the bows ... beyond the special food and social gatherings ... so that we might see the true miracle of the season ... the birth of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! As Pastor Hardy said ... my name is Kate Schroeder and it is my honor to be here with you today.

Today in Scripture we meet a strange character named John the Baptist. We are just beginning to get that warm rosy feeling of Christmas ... and here comes John ... with fire in his eyes ... and his long, accusing finger pointing our way ... his mouth, spewing stern words of judgment ... **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**¹ John has appeared in the Gospel reading every Second Sunday of Advent for the past 1,500 years. He is almost like a bad recurring dream ... just when we have visions of sugarplums in our heads ... John comes shouting ... **you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**² John is an uncomfortable reality ... making us feel guilty ... snatching the “joy” out of our Christmas carols and the “peace” out of our hearts.

John reminds me of the peculiar uncle that no one wants to talk about ... he doesn't appear in our nativity scenes and there aren't any Christmas carols written about him ... so, imagine what the people of the first century thought of him. He must have been a frightful sight to them too. John is a man from the wilderness ... he wears **clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food (is) locusts and wild honey.**³ He must be a decent preacher, though, because **the people of Jerusalem and all Judea (are) going out to him ... and they (are) baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**⁴ You have to wonder why all those people come to him since they hear scathing words like ... **who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**⁵

John doesn't fit into our 21st century idea of what church ought to be, either. We want to feel good about ourselves and we expect our religion to serve our needs, don't we? Guilt and personal responsibility are imprudent and the thought of sin only serves to discourage us. All we want to hear is a little good news ... not John's bad news, right? So, why is John placed here in

¹ Matthew 3.2

² Matthew 3.7

³ Matthew 3.4

⁴ Matthew 3.4-6

⁵ Matthew 3.7b-10

the lectionary on this Second Sunday of Advent ... in what seems like a most inopportune time? Why is John bellowing his harsh, cruel language of repentance ... when all we what to hear about is the birth of the babe born in Bethlehem?

Repentance is a recurring message here in Matthew and throughout Jesus' ministry, and therefore, is a primary theme of the Christian message. In fact, the church was founded on the words of repentance on that spectacular Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the Christian church and brought God's promise of faithfulness. John is an integral part of all four of our Holy Gospels, recognized as good news by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John ... so, John and his message of repentance is a necessary part of the good news we find in Scripture.⁶

The word repent is a funny word, really, and has a deeper meaning than just being sorry for what we have done ... deeper even than resolving to change our behavior. This word was often used by the Old Testament prophets much like John uses it today ... **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**⁷ We often hear it coupled with the word return. As in – repent and return to God – re, of course, means doing something again – like re-do. In the case of repenting and returning to God ... the word repent ... re-pent ... means to pent again. One of the definitions of pent, according to the Oxford Unabridged Dictionary, means “to attach”. Return

...

re - turn ... means to turn again to God. So, if we repent and return to God, that means we turn - and - attach - again - to - God. There is one slight problem here, though. We cannot ... exactly ... by our own strength or understanding ... repent and return to God. Because, as you know, everything comes from God ... and God gives us free will ... therefore with the free will that God gives us, we can return ... and then, since everything is God's action ... it is actually God who re-attaches to us. In order for God to re-attach to us ... we present ourselves as willing ... open ... we have a change of heart ... we seek God's direction in our lives ... we want to be transformed under God's authority. But, still ... even this is not dependent upon us, or even something we can do on our own. This paradox of faith is best expressed in Romans. St. Paul says, **I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, it is ... (the) sin that dwells within me. Who will rescue me from this body of death? ... Jesus Christ our Lord!**⁸

At any rate, Jesus puts this act of repenting and returning another way ... he says, **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**⁹ These words suggest a fundamental change of direction ... a change where our agenda, where our self-interest, our goals, our desires, our dreams and our behavior turn away from what is our own ... and turn toward that which is Christ's. It is a fundamental change ... a change in the core of our being. We are no longer our own independent person, but we are each ... first and foremost ... a beloved child of God.

⁶ Many of the above ideas were gotten from a sermon by Dr. David C. Fisher, *Get Ready! The Library of Distinctive Sermons*, Questar Publishers, (1996), pps. 169-172.

⁷ Matthew 3.2

⁸ Romans 7.20, 24-25a

⁹ Matthew 16.24

The notion of giving up our own agendas is not a popular one in our culture, but that's exactly what happens in our Baptism. John says **I baptize you with water for repentance.**¹⁰ Through daily repentance ... daily re-commitment ... daily re-attaching to God ... our old selves are drowned in the waters of our Baptism and our new-selves then live in Christ. In Baptism ... we die to our own self-interest, our own goals, our own desires ... we relinquish the belief that we can make it on our own and we are re-born into God in Christ. In Baptism, God claims us as God's own ... and so, we point to the one whose interest ... whose goals ... and whose desires under which we are willing to live. Come to think of it, John is a pretty good example of this, isn't he? John is **the voice of one crying out in the wilderness** ... he says ... **'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'**¹¹ John says, don't look at me ... the **one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.**¹² He says ... it's not me who is important ... pay attention to the one who is to come!

I guess John isn't so strange after all.

The coming birth of the Messiah promises change if we are willing to receive it ... when we turn around ... turn away from our old selves. A new day is dawning in these weeks of Advent. The birth of our Savior ... the one who is to come ... Jesus the Christ ... will re-attach to us ... will bring us new life. When we return ... if we open our hearts ... our minds ... our bodies ... and our souls to the Good News that John brings to us today ... then, we will be re-attached ... we will be transformed.

John is here in this Second Sunday of Advent ... not to discourage us, but to show us that we are about to be re-turned ... we are about to be re-attached... we are about to be transformed by God's grace ... transformed by God's love ... transformed by God's mercy in Christ who is about to be born in Bethlehem! **Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths!**¹³ Amen.

Copyright © 2007, Kate Schroeder. All rights reserved.

¹⁰ Matthew 3.11a

¹¹ Matthew 3.3

¹² Matthew 3.11

¹³ Matthew 3.3