

"God's Doberman"

Second Sunday of Advent
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

10:45 a.m. Sunday, December 5, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Matthew 3:1-12

Anyone who has heard me preach knows that I'm a visual preacher, that is, I usually take a symbol or image or metaphor and play with it through the course of a sermon. You also know that my sense of humor and vision of things can be a little wacky at times.

Therefore, it should surprise no one that as I read the Gospel text for today I had this image of John the Baptist as the Doberman pinscher of the Gospels. In our readings, he always appears right before Christmas, when no one's defenses are up. Here we are trying to get to the stable in Bethlehem. We are not hurrying, lighting one candle at a time to mark the weeks. With a few weeks to go, we can see that starlit barn where everything this world needs is about to happen. It is right up ahead there, with people already gathering around it, and for those of us who love it, it is all we can focus upon.

We aren't really thinking about those dark nights left that separate us from it when all of a sudden – GRRROW-ROW-ROW!!! – this big old dog with a spiky collar has got us by the ankle. "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near." And before he is through, our heads are pounding with images of vipers, wrath, axes, trees being felled, and unquenchable fire, when all we really wanted was a chance to sing "Silent Night."

And yet, there is no getting around him. Every single Gospel writer introduces Jesus by talking about John, which means that in some way or another the Doberman is God's idea. Looking a little like Elijah the great prophet of the Old Testament, and sounding a little like Isaiah from the 6th century, John appears as the watchdog who makes sure no one wanders into holy precincts unaware. Anyone who can't handle him cannot handle the one who comes after him. As different as they will turn out to be, John's judgment precedes Jesus' grace. They go together, like night and day, because those who know nothing of judgment need nothing of grace.

John's business was repentance. It was what his baptism was all about. When John waded into the water with folks, he was cleaning them up for their audience with God, who, he fully believed, was coming soon. He begged them to change their lives in preparation for that event, and he was not below scaring them half to death if that was what it took.

He offered to hose them down, if they were willing. If they could come out of their comas long enough to see what was wrong with them and say so out loud, then he would wash it away for them; or God would. The past, he promised, would lose its power over them. What they had done, what they had said, what they had made happen and what had happened to them would no longer run their lives. A new start was offered.

As scary as John was, it was a pretty good offer. No wonder they walked days to get to him. No wonder they stood around even after their turns were over, just to hear him

say it again and again, "Repent, turn your lives around, the Kingdom of heaven has come near." What sounds like a threat to us sounded like a promise to them. We hear guilt where they heard pardon, and at least part of the problem in our hearing this is, I think, our resistance to this whole notion of repentance.

Think about it for a moment. The way most of us were taught it, repentance means owning up to how rotten we are. It means saying out loud, if only in the auditorium of our souls, that we are selfish, sinful, deeply defective human beings who grieve the very heart of God, and that, with heads down, knees bent, contrite heart and all, we say we are sorry about it all. It appears as if we dump all our pride on the ground and stomp on it, since pride – as in ego, arrogance, vanity – is the root of all the evil in the world.

Only what if it isn't? What if pride isn't the main problem at all, but its very opposite? What if the main thing most of us need to repent of is not our arrogance, but our sense of despair and hopelessness – that things will never change for us no matter how hard we try; that we will never change; that we're stuck the way we are, or with the mess others have made of our lives? What if our main sin is not that we think too highly of ourselves, but that we don't think highly enough of the power of God to make new, so we live lives that carry no hope within them; we don't begin again to try to change anything in our lives or our situations because we've given into the despair that comes when things haven't changed; or we don't really believe anymore that new life is a possibility for us?

My friends in Christ, I fear this is a deeper sin than pride. Despair kills people in all kinds of ways: the little girl who is abused by an uncle who grows up never to marry because she will not let anyone get close to her again; the family man who loses his job and after weeks and months of searching finds himself sitting at home watching soap operas in the afternoons with a six pack of Bud by his tattered recliner; or the moody teen who doesn't know what's wrong with her, and can't find anyone to talk to, but finds friends who are moodier than her, and for kicks, they go off to shoplift, because at least there is a simple thrill to their lives in that act of cultural defiance, and upon being picked up at the police station hears the mother say "you've been nothing but trouble since the day you were born," and she vows then and there not to let her mother down.

Do we need to hear more examples? They are all around us, maybe even within us. Despair, living with no hope of change, clinging faithfully to a past that, in reality, holds us tenaciously in a grip that keeps us from living not only into a bright future, but a meaningful present, despair is a much more serious problem than pride will ever be for us.

The kind of repentance most of us have an aversion to is all about us, in case you haven't noticed. It is all about, me, me, me, the miserable sinner. No wonder we find it so revolting most of the time. The other kind of repentance, the healing kind, is far more interested in God. It spends more time looking at the Kingdom than in the mirror. It has more faith in God's power to make new than in our own power to mess up our lives.

It is what John the Baptist offered people of his day: a fresh start, a cold shower, a cure for their despair. He offered it as a beginning, not an end. He knew there was someone coming after him who had something much stronger to offer, although he did not know

who or what that was. Meanwhile, he was content to be God's Doberman, the watchdog, nipping at people's heels to get their attention so that they would be wide awake for what and who came next.

And no one, I think, was more surprised than John, when he looked up a short time later, an incident that follows our lesson for today in Matthew's Gospel, when he looked up to see who was wading toward him through the water to be baptized – not the ax-wielding lumberjack he had expected, not a bigger, meaner guard dog than he, but one as gentle as a child, who came as a child, who, in the poetry of Isaiah's images, will "judge the world not by what his eyes see, but with righteousness," for this is the one who has "the spirit of the Lord upon him – the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." This is the one who came as a child, to bring all children under the transforming power of the love and grace of God. God's Doberman was going to hose down the Son of God; now that's an image to keep in mind as we travel through this second week of Advent.

AMEN.