

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Repentance as a Call to Freedom

Repentance as a Call to Freedom

Matthew 3:1-12:

In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

On this second Sunday of Advent, we step once again into the other Christmas story... the one told by Christian tradition as a time of waiting, a time of preparation – an image of pregnancy nearing completion rather than the commercial rat-race of getting and giving. As David reminded us last week, Advent can be a countdown for cultural Christmas activities or it can be a daily awareness that the realm of God is here, now and always. The daily choice is ours to make repeatedly.

Last Tuesday, Peter and I got up at 5am to drive south through the traffic on I-95 to Virginia Beach for a memorial service. We had gotten a call on Saturday saying that our friend, Chip Mueller, died on Thanksgiving morning, less than a month after she had been diagnosed with brain cancer. Peter and I exposed her to clowning at a church retreat in 1978. She loved it! As a diocesan educator, Chip taught, led, defended and encouraged clowning throughout the Diocese of Southern Virginia. We were

not surprised to see clowns at the service. She became the mother and grandmother of many clowns because, to her, "Repent!" meant to turn away from stilted rules and false propriety in the church. According to Chip, the 11th commandment was surely, "Thou shalt not bore thy people!"

Now she is gone and her extended community gathered to grieve her passing. After the service, we were invited back to their home for more food and more stories. Then, as we started to leave, her husband asked us to "look at her bookcase." Puzzled, we walked down the hall with him and turned into a small bedroom/office. There, on her shelves, was the story of her spiritual journey, beginning with a battered copy of *I'm OK – You're OK*, including writers like Elizabeth O'Connor, Henri Nouwen, Walter Breuggemann and Edward Hays, all the way to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It was a picture of her spiritual search over time. In fact, her bookcase looked a lot like mine and maybe yours as well.

We live in a time when reading and imagination can take us far beyond the doctrines of one church or denomination. We can pluck the fruits of monastic life and sample the mysteries of ancient prayer traditions without understanding much about the fabric of community out of which they came. It is both the gift of our time and technology, and a temptation to think that more words can heal our souls.

"What shall I do with these books?" her husband asked, as we stood there in silence.

"Would you take one? Or more?" I looked hard to find one that I did not already have, and finally chose Henri Nouwen's *Praying with Icons* and Ed Hays' *Feathers on the Wind*. They

speak to me of her search for wholeness ... and my own as well.

1. John the Baptist

This week, the lectionary reading comes from the Gospel according to Matthew.

John the Baptist comes striding in from the desert, clothed in a scratchy robe of camel's hair, shouting "Repent! Repent! For the realm of God has come near!"

When I hear those words or another invitation to confession here on a Sunday morning, I rummage around in the catchall drawer of my soul and look for something I can confess. I have learned, of course, that repent means "to feel sorry, contrite or conscience-stricken: to regret some past action." Although I try to live with integrity, I always find something to confess, silently or aloud. In my mission group, we "go to confession" by phone each month before communion Sunday... and I appreciate the practice of looking at my life with an eye toward intentions I am not fulfilling. Nevertheless, I do not believe that is what John the Baptist is addressing. It is something much bigger and more fundamental than confessing personal shortcomings.

The text says that ordinary people flocked out of Jerusalem to hear John, confessed their sins and were baptized by him. Matthew suggests that John's message of repentance was undiluted **Good News** for the poor who did not belong to the Jewish or Roman elite.

When the church officials, Pharisees and Sadducees, came, John called them a "brood of vipers." Now these were men of

spotless reputation, who had enough wealth and position to follow the Jewish Law to the nth degree, but John challenged them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” What was that about? What is the fruit worthy of repentance?

I have been living with this scripture for several weeks now, wondering what would unlock this ancient story and get me beyond my cartoonish picture of John the Baptist, railing away on a street corner at the passing crowd with their arms full of Christmas packages.

Then, last Tuesday, as three clowns brought the elements forward for Eucharist at Emmanuel Church and tied a large bunch of balloons to the communion rail, I heard John’s call to repent with new ears. It was not so much a call to confession as it was a **call to freedom!**

“Repent! Repent! Turn **away** from the cultural mirror of who you are,” John said to the ordinary people who flocked to hear him, “and turn **toward** God’s image of who you are meant to be.”

Let go of the servitude that erodes your human spirit. Step beyond the spiteful looks as you fumble with your food stamps at the checkout counter. Lift up your head and see this look of love and acceptance. Know that you are part of God’s family! It was good news to the poor!

His message to the Pharisees was the same: “Repent! Turn **away** from your definition of success, of power and meaning, and turn **toward** God’s realm. You are meant to be part of God’s peaceable kingdom, here and now.” Even John’s sharp rebuke holds the passion of his love for them too.

To be honest, I find myself in this story with Sadducee shoes on, clinging tightly to privilege and persona. Last week, watching the clowns at Emmanuel, I heard John's call for repentance as **good news** – as an invitation to turn away from the fears and lies that keep me quiet when I should speak out or at least ask a clear question. Those are the demons that I need to confront.

I hope you will pause and find your place in this story – a see that God's realm is close by.

2. Isaiah's Vision (Isa 11:1-10)

What does this Realm of God look like? The Hebrew Testament reading from Isaiah makes it quite clear:

...the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid...and a little child shall lead them. Former enemies will share space together. Israel and Palestine will sit down together. Predators will give up the hunt and make safe space for their prey... And the whole-heartedness of a little child will guide the way. Peacemaking is clearly the work of this kingdom. It is very different from the unrestrained competition that characterizes our culture... from sports to politics, economics and entertainment.

Parker Palmer writes about living a "divided life," and how segmenting one piece from another allows us to participate in unconscious violence without even realizing what we are doing. I do not remember if he uses the term "soul murder," but that is what sticks in my mind. Our current American fixation on safety and security virtually guarantees that we will feel like there is never enough of anything! Nevertheless, that strange man in a hair shirt who comes crying to us out of the

desert reminds us, on this second Sunday of Advent, that there is another way!

On Thanksgiving Day, I watched a small miracle that was taking place in our kitchen. Kathryn Wysocky-Johnson was there, breast-feeding Soren as she listened closely to Isabel telling about something in her two-year-old way. It dawned on me that Isabel was learning that her mother could love Baby Soren and love her too. In that simple way, Isabel was learning how to love her baby brother instead of hating him as a rival. I felt a tug in my heart as I watched the three of them interact, and realized that I am still learning that lesson- because we live in a culture that always sets up competition and encourages rivalry between the haves and have-nots.

Only in community, that gossamer fabric between private and public life, do we learn this amazing capacity for love. In his new book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer provides specific suggestions for creating "circles of trust" that will provide a base from which to operate more consciously from an alternative perspective in a culture of crass exploitation. I recommend it as a practical guide for every group at Seekers.

3. Leadership

Violence will not simply disappear because we learn how to love our own children. Isaiah saw that the wolf would never live peaceably with the lamb until a different kind of leadership emerged. The leader envisioned by Isaiah in the sixth century B.C. was full of wisdom and compassion. In this weeks' lesson, he wrote:

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of

wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord ... with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...

Too often, we assume that Isaiah was speaking only about Jesus or the future messiah. Suppose, instead, that Isaiah is describing the Jesus-people of every generation, who will speak truth to power and work for peace and justice?

Isaiah names what we look for in leaders who have the courage to invite warring groups to the table, who see beyond the narrow sectarian interests of me and mine, us and ours. I want to offer an example, not because it is the best or only one, but because it is something with which I am involved.

At the Cathedral, here in Washington, D.C., there will be an Interfaith women's conference called Sacred Circles in February. Although it is an Episcopal church, the Cathedral is known as "a house of prayer for **all** people." It is a Christian center with an interfaith welcome. Moreover, the Sacred Circles Conference is the biggest event on their crowded calendar of public offerings.

There are conservatives who regularly target the cathedral staff with criticism of that conference, threaten to withhold financial support and complain about the creative rituals. I know it takes courage and compassion to withstand that kind of attack! I want to say publicly that I believe the Sacred Circles Conference is about God's work in the world...beyond a single church or denomination. I am glad to be associated with it and particularly value the opportunity to work with women of other faiths because I believe that God's realm is much larger and more complex than any of us can imagine! I want to

keep my feet firmly planted in the Christian tradition and my heart wide open to the people who dare to turn away from cultural power systems toward stewarding God's whole creation.

I believe that we live in a critical time, when discernment and courage are needed as never before. The stakes are very high ... because our power to plunder creation is so great. In 1934, Carl Jung wrote about hearing John's call to live another way. As quoted in the most recent issue of *Sojourners*, Jung wrote:

The most tremendous danger that man has to face is the power of his ideas. No cosmic power on earth ever destroyed 10 million (people) in four years. But man's psyche did it. And it can do it again...

*What is important and meaningful to my life is that I shall live as fully as possible **to fulfill the divine will within me**. This task gives me so much to do that I have no time for any other. Let me point out that if we were all to live in this way we would need no armies, no police, no diplomacy, no politics, no banks. We would have a meaningful life and not what we have now – madness.*

Jung wrote that as Nazism began to take hold beyond the borders of Germany. John the Baptist was crying out for repentance then too, but the horror of World War II was not averted. Now we seem to be at another crisis point, when those who disagree with the conservative agenda for America are branded as immoral and unchristian. I want to find a way to hold the tension between opposing needs, to listen and speak with respect and compassion.

Because we are a small community, where we can let ourselves

be known and loved in spite of the Sadducee shoes we may be wearing, this is a place where we can loosen the grip of fear that our culture promotes and dare to let love in, at least a little. This is a place where we can practice living “as fully as possible to fulfill the divine will,” as Jung says.

John the Baptist called for repentance because, he said, “the Realm of God is very near.” It is a call to freedom **and** responsible use of our gifts to serve the world we live in.

Let me close with Paul’s letter to the little group of believers in Rome from this week’s reading:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may glorify God with one voice, the Father and Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.