

John the Baptist's Continuous Message Mark 1:1-8

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A Christian bishop in England talked about an incident when he had a small white highland terrier which he kept spotlessly clean by frequent washing, brushing and powdering.

One night there was a winter storm that dropped a fresh blanket of snow on the countryside and when he looked out the window of the parsonage, the outside glistened under the morning sun.

As he gazed out the window, he saw a drab looking dog walk across the snow. He wondered who it belonged to and then realized it was his own. But against that dazzling background of new snow, the dog appeared dirty.

That picture is what we are like when it comes to our own righteousness in God's sight. Repentance, forgiveness of sins and a changed life, is the message of John the Baptist.

My text is Mark 1:1-8.

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,^[a] the Son of God,^[b] **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"^[c]—"a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"^[d] **4** And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6** John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with^[e] water, but he will baptize you with^[f] the Holy Spirit." This is the Word of God.

Every year in the second week of Advent, we are reintroduced to John the Baptist. And from what we know of him, it seemed he

did not fit in. Everything about him was odd. He wore clothes made of camel's hair, in contrast to the flowing robes of the religious leaders.

He had a strange diet of grasshoppers and wild honey. His area of ministry was not in the temple or in the synagogue, but the desert. And I suppose if he were alive today, he would have done well on the "Survivor" television series, but would have been the first to be voted off.

John wasn't one to use warm and fuzzy words such as caring, sharing and holiday cheer, but used the hard words such of repentance, judgment and right living. To most observers, he wasn't a salesman or politician, but a breath of fresh air where his message continues to penetrate the hearts of God's people.

As Christian believers, John's words should resonate with all of us if we turn our hearts to the Lord. When the Prophet Isaiah spoke of the Messenger it was John.

Do you remember the Tonight Show that featured Johnny Carson? Mr. Carson had a moderator who opened each show and that person was Ed McMahon. Every night, the show began with the following. "***From Hollywood, the Tonight show starring Johnny Carson. This is Ed McMahon along with the NBC orchestra inviting you to join Johnny and his guests. And now heeeeeeere's Johnny.***" Do you remember that?

Even though the show has been off the air for over 25 years, Ed McMahon is remembered as the one who introduced Johnny.

In a sense that was the role of John the Baptist. He was not the main event, but he was the one who pointed others to Jesus.

The other task of the Messenger was to prepare the way. In ancient times, if a king were to visit a village, workmen would

arrive early, fill in pot holes and make the road smooth and straight for the arrival of the king.

Now John went a step further. He called people to get their hearts right and there was a word that he used and it was repentance. The Greek word for repentance is metanoia. Meta=change. Noia=mind. So what you have is "Changed mind."

And the image that I have is the U Turn traffic symbol. That is what we are to do in the spiritual realm.

I believe the message of John resonates with the girl who had a conversion experience in a church and the next day in school the kids talked about it.

They asked her, "What are you now?"

She answered, "A sinner."

They asked, "What is the difference?"

She answered, "Before I was sinner running after sin. But now I'm a sinner running from sin."

That was a pretty good answer. When we encounter the Lord, we are to go in the right direction.

In this post-modern society, the word "sin" is out. It is persona non grata. Progressive theologians will tell us we are created in God's image and we are basically good and not in need of salvation. The emphasis is now love, grace and our happiness. Unfortunately, many modern-day ministers feel the same way.

What society calls a character flaw, God calls it a sinful nature.
What society calls an error, God calls it disobedience.
What society calls a choice, God calls it tragedy.

What society calls a mistake, God calls it lawlessness.
What society calls a weakness, God calls it willfulness.

In the teachings in the Bible, sin comes from inside us, our hearts and minds. It is a metaphor from hunting where the arrow fell short of its target. It is missing the mark. Basically, sin is refusing to listen to God and following the wrong path.

John's message of repentance can be seen in this faith story. Once there was a woman who had serious health problems and was taken to the hospital where she was admitted. The tests revealed that she had a damaged liver.

When she received that diagnosis, she was so angry at God; that she was determined to get to the hospital chapel to tell him off.

Strong enough to get out of bed, she took the elevator to the first floor where she slowly made her way to the chapel. Her intention was to tell the Lord he was a fraud who passed himself off as loving and kind and when anyone had begun to experience good times, He would pull out the rug from underneath them.

As this woman stepped over the chapel threshold, she tripped and fell. As she looked up from the floor, the only thing she could see was the wooden altar with these carved words in the wood. "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." When she saw that, she knew the Lord was speaking.

She lowered her head onto the carpet and repeated over and over, "Lord be merciful to me a sinner." Right there on the carpet floor of the hospital chapel, she surrendered to God. As weak as she was, she managed to get back on her feet and made it back to her hospital room.

The next day, she had more tests and at the same time she had begun to feel better. Towards the end of the day, the doctor

informed her that her liver appeared to be normal, but he didn't know how. But the woman thought in her heart, ***"I know, oh but I know. God has brought me to the brink of disaster, just to get me to turn my life over to him."***

Repentance is more than just a theological version of a New Year's resolution of the do's and the don'ts. What repentance causes us to do is look inward, to invite Christ into our hearts.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

2 Cor 5:17 If anyone be in Christ, they are a new creation, old things have passed away. Behold all things are new.

Here is a quote that resonates with me.

True repentance is about transformation, not torture or torment.

Let me close:

John's call is an invitation to change the direction of our lives. For those who have walked with Christ for many years, it may not be necessary to make a complete 180 turn, but it could be a small in course correction.

Sometimes when we come to church, read the word of God, the hymns we sing, the prayers we pray, the message we listen to, we often come away with a desire to do better, to get closer to God, to live more wisely and make better decisions. That is all in keeping with John's message.

Let us pray. Father, help us to examine our lives. Help us to make those big or small decisions to grow closer to you. Thank you for sending us your Holy Spirit to dwell in us and help us to continue in the right direction. Amen.