

“Returning” CHC 12-4-16

Old Testament, Isaiah 11:1-10

New Testament, Matthew 3:1-12

We are approaching the season of ‘returns’. Returning gifts that is. After Christmas gifts or clothes that we do not like get returned. I recall many post- Christmas shopping excursions with our four kids returning gifts that they did not approve of in order to find that ‘right’ clothing item. We still enclose gift receipts with the clothes we send them so they may make exchanges and get what they want. However, it makes Christmas day a bit more pleasant if they are thrilled with what we sent.

John preaches a lot about ‘returning’. Returning to God that is. We might think of our lives today as gifts that we return to God, gifts that we may have abused and misused in some manner. What are we exchanging? Could it be that I exchange my unrighteousness for God’s righteousness? What does that really mean? Let’s place ourselves in John’s world and listen to what he means by this gift exchange of ours.

By the time John arrives on the scene God’s people have endured 400 years of God’s silence. The Jews themselves state that “There was no voice, nor any that answered”. Talk about waiting. The leaders of the orthodox Jewish faith, the Sadducees and Pharisees, fall into an institutionally centered faith with its rituals and rules of faith and belief. The ordinary rank and file persons live devoid of any meaningful experience with God beyond those required rituals and doctrine which had become oppressive in their eyes. It is not that they are bad people or that many seek to live properly in God’s eyes. Generally, however, there is a toxic atmosphere infused by the evils and authoritarianism of the Roman state, the self- serving interests of their faith leaders, and the sins and indifference of the people.

No matter. When John arrives all the people discern that the voice of God is returning. For centuries they heard the prophets, such as Ezekiel, proclaim, “A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit I will put within you” (Ezekiel 36:26-7). There is an intrinsic authority in John’s person and voice. He is proclaiming that “the kingdom of heaven has come near”. Excitement and anticipation is returning. The people of Jerusalem, those throughout all Judea and the region along the Jordan, those who voted for Trump and those who didn’t, are all flocking to hear this guy tell them to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”. After all, why would you go to hear some person tell you to repent unless some deep need is prompting you and that the Spirit of God just might be behind that voice? Why did people go to Billy Graham crusades? Why do people go to church?

When in college, my fraternity brother asked to attend church with me when his girlfriend told him she might be pregnant. Why? Do we recognize something deeper within our soul that isn’t in alignment? Is there a sense that we need to change the way we are thinking, living and behaving, that we have lost control of ourselves and allowed our selfish human desires and appetites to run amok?

That John is in the wilderness is symbolic. This is the place where God rescues them from Egypt, where God sustains, forms, and shapes them as God’s people. It is far away from Jerusalem, their Washington,

D.C., where the elites hold the power, control the money, and make decisions on behalf of a populace whom they have little or no connection with.

In contrast, John's diet and clothing signify his disconnection from all of that. He has none of the trappings of power and money to influence anything. But he has one thing. The Spirit of God is upon him. The message he brings is not his message, but God's. He is the vehicle, and it is recognized that prior to proclaiming this word from God he spends many years in the presence of God. The 400 hundred years of silence is over. When he recognizes Jesus, God's anointed Messiah, he can say "but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals". Some even ask if John himself might be the Messiah. He is quick to say, "I am not the Messiah" (John 1:20). "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord', as the prophet Isaiah said" (verse 23). He knows who he is. He knows who God is. He knows his role, a servant of the Lord.

Through his preaching God is calling the people to a new social vision embodied in God's reign. One enters this new reign of God by repentance. John includes the coming Messiah within this reality; "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire". Again, we hear echoes of the prophet Ezekiel; "And I will put my Spirit in you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my judgments and do them".

Repentance incorporates both a judgment and a promise. The judgment side comes down hard on the institutional leaders. They represent the sociopolitical alliance with Rome and the status quo. They are the power brokers of that world. So when John eyes them among the people he says, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He acknowledges who they are in their lifestyle, theology and behavior and how the people view them. Sometimes our enemies define us as much as our friends do.

Where would God's judgment come down on us? Do we assume privilege? Just because Abraham is their Father is no presumption to assume they are okay with God. They believe that the merits of Abraham saves them, merits that suffice even for those who do evil. They can say, "If Thy children were mere dead bodies, Abraham's merits would suffice for them". They believe that a person can live on spiritual capital of the past. However, none of us can. God has no grandchildren. Every person and generation must decide how they will respond to the judgement and salvation of Jesus Christ.

John preaches to the religious leaders, all the people present, and those of us present this morning with these words, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves that 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 that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire".

Let's note one thing. Repentance is not simply adhering to proper doctrine. It is not simply confessing Jesus is the Messiah. The repentance John and Jesus proclaim embraces a deep ethical and moral dimension. The Spirit of God is active in this process, enabling our eyes to be opened. We see our prejudices, light is given to guide us, and our self-will turned toward the will of God.

Repentance means a turning from our self-directed lives and a turning toward God and embracing God's direction for our lives. "The transparent primary meaning of repentance in Judaism is always a change in a person's attitude towards God, and in the conduct of life, a religious and moral reformation of a people or and individual" (Barclay, Matthew, vol. 1, p.45). Our Confessions would agree.

Let's use an example from Jesus' ministry. Remember Zacchaeus? A wealthy tax collector, Jesus eyes him in a tree and invites himself to dinner at his house. Zacchaeus accommodates and some in the crowd judge Jesus for being a guest in a sinner's house. In the presence of Jesus, however, repentance is in full play. "Look", Zacchaeus replies, "half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much". The acknowledgement of the authority of Jesus as Lord, and the ethical response of reparation mark the completion of the circle of salvation. Jesus looks at him and says, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:1-10). Salvation isn't acknowledged as arriving until reparation is offered.

We are all for repentance if it doesn't cost us anything. Shouldn't I just have to confess Jesus as my Lord and Savior? Our Reformed tradition stresses that we are saved by grace through faith alone in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Though it is implied and stated in our confessions, we often don't give the ethical and moral dimension the attention it deserves. But John and Jesus uphold the relationship between confession and ethical and moral change, giving equal weight to both.

This causes me to look at my own attitude toward repentance. We see the person on the street holding a sign shouting "Repent!" and dismiss it. More often we evade contemplation of our own sins by condemning those of others. We rarely arrive at that place of personal responsibility David is able to comprehend; "For I know my transgression, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned" (Psalm 51:4). Let's be honest, honest remorse is not easy.

Some get upset at the idea of reparation for sins done to others. This is a live debate raised in one of our recent Courageous Conversation events dealing with race relations. However, it is not unprecedented.

Allow me to take you to recent German history. Listen to the remarks of the parliament of the GDR to the Jewish people; "On behalf of the citizens of this land, we admit responsibility for the humiliation, expulsion, and murder of Jewish men, women, and children....We ask all Jews of the world to forgive us for the persecution and humiliation of Jewish citizens in our country after 1945 as well" (Yancey, "Grace Notes", p. 239). That statement helped to deal with the guilt affecting East Germany for five decades through which their government denied any need for forgiveness. West Germany had already repented and paid out sixty billion dollars in reparation to the Jews as an act of transnational forgiveness.

John and Jesus teach that the judgment, promise and hope of true repentance involve complete life change. Repentance is transformational. What sins do we need to exchange today for the transforming righteousness of Christ? Let us prepare our hearts to receive Christ's gift of the Bread and the Cup.

