

Repentance, Preparation, and the Spiritual Life

Luke 3:7-18 *And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"*

The Advent season gives us the opportunity to look at our spiritual lives in terms of repentance and preparation. Repentance means change. Preparation is making room for something new. The spiritual work of repentance creates room to receive new life that God gives us in Christ. The problem is that we tend to want the new life without the preparatory work. In terms of John's message, we want God to come swooping into our lives and the life of the world without our having to level some mountains, straighten some crooked roads, and smooth out some rough places in ourselves, our society, or our faith community. New life comes to us as a gift, yet we have to move toward it, open our lives to receive it. And that is the spiritual work of repentance and preparation.

John's message is: "Prepare the way of the Lord!" How do we do that? By this thing called repentance. In the Greek it is *metanoia*, a wonderful word, rich in meaning. It means changing our hearts or minds. It means going in a different direction. It can mean waking up to the reality of our lives in their relationship to God, to other people, and to the world around us as the good creation. *Metanoia* means a transformation of our lives, or the unfolding of our lives, our true God-created selves. Repentance as it is used here does not mean feeling sorry for our sins. The New Testament uses quite another word for that. Remorse for the things that distance us from God and our true lives may be a motivation for change. However, it is not the whole thing at all. American Protestant revivalism hijacked the meaning of repentance, turned it into emotionalism and having a "religious experience." That's not what John is talking about. John is talking about a changed and changing life, a new way of living. That doesn't happen overnight or in an instant. Repentance is an ongoing process throughout our lives.

People responded to John's message. And how does John greet the crowd coming toward him to be baptized? "You bunch of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" John challenges their motivations. Why are you REALLY coming to be baptized? Do you really want to change, or are you just playing

religious games? Do you really want to wake up and live in a new way? Or do you just want another religious experience, a spiritual lift?

Earlier this year I read a book by Pema Chodron, American Tibetan Buddhist teacher. Her book has the wonderful title: NO TIME TO LOSE. She says basically that we have one short and precious life to live. What are we going to do with it? Are we going to wake up, or sleepwalk through it? Are we going to waste our lives worrying about what other people think of us? Or are we going to be the persons we really are? Are we going to continue wasting our time and energies in anger, fear, guilt, or negativity? Or are we going to work at living with the joy and peace that come from paying attention to our lives in each and every moment, and living with compassion toward others and ourselves? John is saying the same thing in his abrupt way. Sometimes we need abruptness to wake us up. Are you serious about letting God's kingdom come into this world beginning with your own life? Are you serious about living the life of spiritual awareness and right relationships? Or are you just playing religious games or wanting religious experiences?

John goes further. Don't fool yourselves by saying, We are descendants of Abraham. We can coast along on that. No, says John. That's nothing special. God can make Abraham's descendants out of these rocks. Even now the ax is ready to cut down the unfruitful trees. Show your specialness by how you live, by your changed and changing lives. Are you going to wake up and live as you are made and meant to live as God's beloved daughters and sons? Or are you going to stay asleep, resting on your laurels, living in the past, or thinking that just because you are part of a certain religious tradition or church everything is okay? The emphasis is on John's words EVEN NOW. Where is your life now? What are you doing now? What things about your life need your attention now? What can you do now to become more alive, more loving, more just, more faithful in your relationships with God and the world, beginning with those right around you?

When we sit each day for our time of inward journey, we are responding to the urgency of John's words--"even now." We are seeking to be more aware of what is going on in us now, what our feelings and thoughts are, what we may be avoiding that needs attention, and what change we need to make in a particular area of our lives. Self-examination and self-understanding are crucial dimensions of the spiritual life, or the inward journey as we call it. It

is the way we prepare for new life, the way we make a highway in our lives for God. The spiritual life is about becoming more and more awake and alive in the present moment to our own lives, our relationships, and to God. It is about “even now.” John is aware of the spiritual truth that the only way to get to a better future is through being fully alive in the present moment.

John has gotten the crowd, and us too perhaps, all worked up and maybe a little anxious. Okay, John, we hear you. So what should we do? John keeps it simple and practical. If you have two coats, give one to someone who needs it. If you have food, share it with someone who needs it. Tax collectors, stop ripping people off and lining your own pockets. Practice honesty and fairness. Soldiers, do not intimidate or exploit people, and be satisfied with your pay. These things don’t sound very exotic or heroic. You’d think John would come up with something like, Quit your job, take a vow of poverty, and go do mission work. Or, Establish a movement to bring about peace throughout the world. Something big and impressive like that. But John basically tells people that they are to change something in their lives so that they are more humane, so that they live in right ways in their day-to-day lives and relationships.

These things may seem modest to us. We are part of a community that has lifted up the potential in each of us to do great things for the world, meeting the needs of people. Camp Kum Ba Yah, serving hundreds of children each summer. Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship, making possible hundreds of units of low income housing. The Wood Ministry in its day, delivering over 300 loads of firewood each season to impoverished and freezing people in our city. Miriam’s House, the Gateway, serving homeless and recovering men and women. But the point is NOT about doing big things. That may be where we end up, or it may not be. John’s point is that the life of repentance and preparation begins with doing things that make us more fair, just, respectful, and sharing people. That’s pretty modest, but if everybody in the world started at that point, we’d be a long way down the road toward God’s kingdom.

That’s how we prepare the way. That’s how we begin this process of repentance, by making changes in the way we live, changes we are fully capable of making, things we can see if we look simply and honestly at ourselves. Do I have more possessions or income than I need? What can I do to meet the need of someone who doesn’t have enough? How is my anger or fear or whatever is going on inside me affecting my life and my relationships with those

around me? What specific thing can I do right now, small though it may be, to move in a different direction, to begin changing the situation?

That’s all that John is saying. We can act our way toward a place where we are then met by the new life God brings us in Christ. Sitting around feeling guilty or discouraged or despondent about ourselves or life doesn’t get it. Waiting for God to miraculously change our spiritual outlook doesn’t get it. But taking a step, then another step does get it, does move us toward a new situation. The message of John seems to be this: If you want to receive the new life God is about to give, then make some change in your life in that direction. If you want to live the life of compassion, then do something that shows compassion. Drop your judgments and try to understand a person you are angry with. If you want to see God’s justice prevail in human life, look at how you can be more just in your dealings with those right around you. If you want to experience and live the life of God’s forgiveness and grace, then practice forgiveness and grace with others and yourselves. Act your way toward a new way of being. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the injustice and violence of the world, close to despair about the conditions of human life, you aren’t doing a thing to help by all your despondency. Practice placing things in God’s hands through deeper prayer. Practice having the joy that comes from knowing God’s presence with and care of us and all the creation. Then you will be freed up to do what you feel called to do to make things better. Whatever it is for each of us, we can take steps toward God’s kingdom and God’s kingdom will begin dawning in our hearts and minds and lives.

Someone is coming after me, says John, who will baptize you with God’s spirit and with fire, someone who will ignite your life and lead you even further into the life of the kingdom of God. When we are working on those changes that make us more just, compassionate, and loving, when we are taking steps away from the things that cause us and others pain...in short, when we are moving toward new life by doing everything we can do, then we meet one who is coming toward us. He will call us to follow him, to make our whole lives a journey in his company. He will share with us the power and fire of his own life as one who is full of God. And we, who have been doing the work of *metanoia*, preparing the way in our own lives, will also find ourselves becoming more and more full of God.