

Transformation and Renewal in the Spirit

Matthew 3:1-12
December 9, 2007

I.

I know we have been working to put Hurricane Katrina behind us. But think back, if you will, to the end of August, 2005. Remember the time just before the storm came ashore. People were warning you of the danger. They were telling you to stop doing what you were doing and get ready for what was coming. They were telling you that you could not live your life normally as if nothing was about to happen, and that you had to change your plans.

That's also what John the Baptist said in today's Gospel. He told people to stop doing what they were doing and warned them of the coming danger if they did not. Just as the voice on your radio told you to get to the literal high ground for your safety, John's voice in the wilderness told people to get to the moral high ground for their salvation.

Why did John do this? Scripture tells us that he was preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus Christ. But what needed preparing? Certainly Jesus' teachings and miracles were going to speak for themselves. What did John the Baptist add to the picture?

The answer is that in addition to baptizing Jesus, which we will celebrate in a few weeks, John's message also foreshadowed the beginning of God's kingdom with Christ's birth, and the fulfillment of the kingdom with Christ's coming again.

You might recall from last week's sermon that Advent has two parts to it. We remember the beginning of God's kingdom with Christ's birth on Christmas day, and we also anticipate the completion of that kingdom with Jesus' coming again in glory at the end of history.

John the Baptist proclaimed both, and thus he was placed by God at the pivotal center of the most crucial time in history for God's people. The word of God that John received in the wilderness was no less than the revelation of God's plan for humanity.

So John's preaching and ministry must be taken seriously. He was more than an advance man or warm-up act. He was more than someone who just announced the main attraction. He was the last prophet before Jesus, and we have had none since.

II.

John made two important points in today's Gospel. First, he went about the wilderness of Judea calling people to repent and change their lives. Why did he do this? The Bible does not suggest that people living in first century Palestine were notorious sinners. In fact, Jews of the time probably were model citizens compared with the pagans surrounding them.

Second, John said that he baptized with water, but that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Does this mean that baptism by water is just part of the process, and that we must somehow also have another type of baptism? Is there still another ritual to go through?

Let's begin by looking more closely at this idea of repentance. A common understanding is that repentance reflects a sense of regret or sorrow for doing something wrong. John the Baptist, however, had a broader view that went beyond sin and morality. He also called people to repent from things that interfered with their relationship with God even if they were not wrong in a moral sense. John was proclaiming the need to come to faith as well as to depart from sin.

And it's also clear that John believed repentance was an action, not just a feeling. It meant changing direction and doing something different, not just being remorseful or sorry. Repentance, according to John, meant nothing unless accompanied by an actual change in behavior, and not just a change of feelings about behavior.

This leads into John's prophetic words that Jesus would come to baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. John was not talking about a second baptism. We only are baptized once. But through baptism people can be led to do good works that are the fruits of the Holy Spirit working in them. Through the Spirit repentance becomes a discernable action and not just a feeling.

And it's important to understand that when John the Baptist was doing his work, he was living at a time in the history when the Holy Spirit had not yet fully come into the world. Even at Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit was only revealed as descending on Jesus himself. Nothing suggests that the Spirit remained for others in the same way.

And in fact, the Spirit was not intended to fully work in the world so long as Jesus himself was in it. It was only after the resurrection and ascension, when the Spirit came in tongues of fire at Pentecost, that the Holy Spirit as our counselor and advocate was given to us. It was only then that the temporary revelation of God in the incarnate Christ could become a more permanent presence of God through the Holy Spirit.

That is what John the Baptist meant when he said Jesus would baptize with fire and the Spirit. He was anticipating the true significance of Pentecost, and was proclaiming in a prophetic way how the Spirit can be part of our lives.

For us today, we inwardly receive the Spirit at baptism when the Spirit is sealed as a sort of glowing ember within us. But that ember, to be truly effective in an outward way, must be fanned into flames so that it acts upon us, and through us, and enables us to live fruitful and abundant lives in Christ.

Some churches and denominations call this fire baptism, or baptism by the Spirit. It's also been referred to as being born again. But it is not a new and different baptism. It develops from our one and only baptism, and can happen in a moment or over time.

And even though the Holy Spirit resides within us as a result of baptism, it does not automatically mean that the Spirit is actively working in our lives. The Spirit can remain dormant. We can quench the Spirit. But when, through our faith, that ember is kindled, then the Spirit emerges and takes control of our lives, and shines forth through us in all we do.

And then our repentance has meaning. If we are traveling down some dead-end road, the Spirit does not lead us to just stop and feel bad about ourselves. Instead we are spiritually encouraged to change something in our lives, to straighten something out, to follow our Lord and Savior, and to make a U-turn that brings us to where God wants us to be.

III.

This leads to the question of how we actually appropriate the meaning of repentance and baptism of the Holy Spirit into our lives today. I'm reminded of the story about the mother and her young son Jimmy who were shopping at the mall. The mother thought her son was following behind as they were walking, but when she looked around she saw that he had stopped and was staring intently at something through a store window.

She turned and went back to him and he said, "Mommy, Mommy, look. There's baby Jesus in the manger." And his mother said, "Come on, Jimmy, we don't have time for all that. We have to get ready for Christmas."

What's wrong with that picture? Obviously, contemporary culture and the commercialization of Christmas caused Jimmy's mother to completely miss the meaning of Christmas as well as the enduring parts of the Advent season.

This is one of the reasons we have Advent. It is intended to be a time of introspection and reflection about our lives, as well as a time of celebration. It is intended to be a time when we give serious thought to whether or not we truly are living the Christian lives to which we aspire.

That's what John the Baptist meant when he called people to repentance, and when he said Jesus would baptize with the Spirit and fire. It meant more than just feeling guilty about being disobedient to God's will, and it meant more than just thinking about having become more distant from God. It also meant being led by the Spirit to actually do something to change it.

We can look at ourselves and do an inventory. We can start anywhere, and we can make it extensive or otherwise. But today, let's ask five fairly easy questions.

First, we can begin with our families. Do we have open, honest, and connected relationships, or are they shallow, or lonely, or dysfunctional in some ways? If so, perhaps we can do something to make the situation turn around. God through the Holy Spirit will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

Second, what about our health? Are we caring for ourselves and respecting the bodies that God gave us, or is our blood pressure a little too high, or perhaps we are concerned about our weight or cholesterol readings, for example. If so, perhaps we can change what we are doing and turn around. God through the Holy Spirit will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

Third, maybe our jobs are rewarding and fulfilling, or maybe they are tedious, demanding, and not connected to our dreams and aspirations. If so, perhaps there is some way we can change what we are doing and turn around. God through the Holy Spirit will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

Fourth, how do we relate to other people? Do we love our neighbor as the commandment tells us, or are we sometimes intolerant, angry, or self-absorbed. If so, we might ask if we can change what we are doing and turn around. God through the Holy Spirit will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

And last but not least, what about our faith? Do we feel connected to God, and is our spirituality real and vital, or is it routine, or dull, or does God seem far away? Once again, if our faith does not seem lively we can change what we are doing and turn around. God through the Holy Spirit will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

IV.

In today's Gospel reading John the Baptist called people to repent, to change their ways, and to make U-turns to get ready for the coming of God's kingdom. That call to repentance is an integral part of salvation offered by God in Christ, and continues to be important in living Christian lives.

John also said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit to help people bear fruit that is worthy of repentance. That part of his message is foundational to fully using the spiritual gifts that we receive through God's grace.

And in two thousand years nothing has changed. John's words then ring true today. We still are called to turn around and to get rid of those things that interfere with our relationship with God. And we still look to the Holy Spirit to help us live in God's will rather than our own. *Amen.*