

Make A U-Turn

Mark 1:1-8

December 7, 2008

I.

This is your lucky day. Or maybe not. You get to hear a sermon while people at the 10:00 am service miss that opportunity. Our annual Advent Festival of Lessons and Music is on tap for them. Seriously, however, they will have a good program, and if any of you have free time later this morning I urge you to come back for some familiar lessons and wonderful music.

But for now, let's consider today's reading from Mark's Gospel. Imagine you are on the couch taking a nap, sound asleep. And someone suddenly shakes you and says "Wake up! Wake up! As you slowly open your eyes and sit up, the person who woke you says, "We're going to have company and they're on their way now. We have to straighten up the house, quick!"

The urgency of that situation can be similar to John the Baptist's sudden appearance on the stage of history. Except, of course, Jews were not napping, but living under foreign domination as they had for several hundred years. Most had given up on prophecies of national restoration. For them, it seemed that the wicked prospered and the righteous suffered. It had been that way for as long as they could remember, and likely would be for as long as they could imagine.

And then, unexpectedly and with no warning, John the Baptist boldly walked out of the Judean wilderness and proclaimed the dawning of a new age. He spoke of an entirely new reality that would change their lives and the world forever. He offered hope and salvation through repentance, forgiveness, and the arrival of the Messiah.

II.

This story of John the Baptist is in all four Gospels with varying degrees of detail. But the message is consistent. Change is on the way. The world will never be the same. Here's another way to look at the story. Think back, if you will, to the end of August, 2005. Remember the day or two before Hurricane Katrina. People warned you of danger. They told you to stop doing what you were doing and get ready for what was coming. You had to change your plans.

That's also what John the Baptist said in today's Gospel, especially in Matthew's and Luke's versions. He told people to stop doing what they were doing and warned them of the coming danger. 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 spiritual high ground for their salvation.

Why did John do this? And to whom was he speaking? 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?

Some scholars say that John was calling Israel as a community to return to God. This would be consistent with the words of Old Testament prophets. Others say John was speaking directly to individuals. This would be consistent with the individual need for hope and renewal that pervaded Jewish culture at the time. It also would resonate with existing pagan ungodliness.

I believe John's importance is that, in addition to his baptism of Jesus, which we celebrate in a few weeks, his message foreshadowed the emergence and fulfillment of God's kingdom. The Word of God that John received in the wilderness and proclaimed to the people was no less than the revelation of God's plan for humanity.

So we see that John's words must be taken seriously. He was more than an advance man. He did more than just announce the main attraction. And he went beyond being a warm-up act.

John was the last of the Bible's great prophets, although some disciples later exercised prophetic ministries. John proclaimed the coming of our Lord and Savior, which was the most important preview of coming attractions in history. In addition, his calling of people to baptism and repentance was crucial to the salvation offered by God in Christ.

III.

And while we certainly should remember John as the forerunner of our Lord and Savior, which is emphasized in next week's Gospel, I would like to speak now of his other two pronouncements that reach across the centuries to us today.

First, he went about Judea calling people to repent. Why did he do this? What did he mean by repentance? The Bible does not suggest that Jews living in first century Palestine were notorious sinners. Jewish society was not regarded as decadent. Romans and pagan Gentiles, however, might have been a different matter to the extent John was speaking to them.

Second, John said that he baptized with water, but that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. 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 with repentance. A common understanding is that repentance means a sense of regret or sorrow for doing something wrong. John the Baptist, however, had a broader view that went beyond sin or morality. He also called people to repent from things that interfered with their relationship with God. He 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. Repentance, according to John, required an actual change in behavior and attitude toward one's neighbor and toward God. He called for change that would be apparent in peoples' lives.

And for many of us, it's probably is not a convenient time of the year to think about changing how we do things. We might be tempted to say, "Give me a break God, cut me some slack and just let me get through Christmas. Then I'll deal with all that other stuff during Lent."

This reminds me of the two elderly ladies leaving church after the preacher had given a robust sermon on the need to repent, and he had used St. Paul's example of dying to sin. One lady asked the other, "Do you think you have died to sin?" She replied, I don't know, but I do recall feeling faint a few times."

Well, feeling faint probably does not cut it according to John the Baptist. He proclaimed the need to actually do something, to actually make a quick U-turn when we find ourselves going down the wrong road, and return to what is right.

John's other point was that he baptized with water, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. John was not describing a second baptism. We are baptized only once, and we receive the Spirit at that time. And through baptism people can be led to do good works that are the fruits of the Holy Spirit working in them. That is Spirit baptism. Through the Spirit we received in baptism our repentance can become a discernable action, and not just a feeling.

But although the Holy Spirit resides within us as a result of baptism, it does not automatically mean that the Spirit is actively working to guide us in the choices we make. The Spirit can remain dormant. We can quench the Spirit. We can rely on our own self-assurance and ignore that inner voice that speaks truth to us. But when, through our faith, the Spirit is awakened, then it emerges and takes control of our lives, and shines forth through us in all we do.

IV.

So how do we appropriate the meaning of repentance and baptism of the Holy Spirit into our lives now? Consider the story of the mother and her young son 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 through a store window.

She turned and went back 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.

And 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 said Jesus would baptize with the Spirit. As I mentioned earlier, 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 do something to change it.

Now, I'm willing to venture the opinion that even though all of us have things in our lives we might change, we're not caught up in circumstances that are really bad. I pray that's true. I would suspect that if we need to change our ways, it relates to things that affect us as Christians. Jesus gave us the Great Commandments. Love God and our neighbors. That probably is where we might productively focus our attention.

What about our faith? Do we feel connected to God, and is our spirituality real and vital, or does God seem far away? Does church uplift our spirits or does it seem routine and dull? 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 and go to him in prayer and in our actions.

And 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. Does pride, vanity or selfishness take precedence over kindness, patience, and charity? If so, we might endeavor to change what we are doing and turn around. God through the Holy Spirit will help us, but again he asks us to take the first step and go to him in prayer and in our actions.

V.

Two thousand years have passed since John the Baptist called people to repent and proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. Some things have changed and some things have not. Nations have come and gone. Societies and cultures have evolved. But the Gospel has stayed the same. Through repentance and faith in our lord Jesus Christ, and a commitment to try to live a Christian life, we gain salvation and eternity.

But even though we try to live faithfully, we don't always accomplish it. There are times when we might be traveling down that unrighteous or spiritually detached road that Satan has made so smooth and attractive for us, and we notice the signs put up by the Holy Spirit. U-turn! U-turn ahead! You know that you can see those signs in your heart. So do what the sign says. Turn around and go back. And then you will find that John the Baptist was right. You will find peace, forgiveness, and the love and joy of the Lord in your life. *Amen.*