

**ON YOUR MARK; LUKE 3:1-8; ADVENT II; DECEMBER 6, 2009  
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It's the second week of Advent; a time for getting ready to meet the Prince of Peace. It's like runners stretching before a race, lining up at the blocks, listening for the cue "on your mark." There is an expression we use at holiday parties – long before Christmas is even close. We greet one another saying, "Merry Christmas." But that would be like firing the gun before the runners are ready.

Hearing those words anytime before midnight on Christmas Eve makes me shudder. I think to myself, "It can't be! If Jesus comes now he'll see me at my worst; my life is the spiritual equivalent of dirty dishes piled high in the sink."

I need every bit of the four weeks of Advent to slow down, listen to the stories and consider how they can redirect my life.

Not that we can do that to perfection – redirect our lives. If we could, we wouldn't need the Prince of Peace. If we think we can, then we still don't need the Prince of Peace. And if we try – to get to perfection – whatever is supple in us will harden and turn brittle.

The point of Advent is we are works-in-progress and can't do it ourselves. Advent is about slowing down, turning around (the literal meaning of 'repentance') and allowing our lives to take whatever shape God chooses to make of them.

John the Baptist's famous formula for this process was 'repent and be baptized.' But the problem is those words are like fly paper to which anything sticks. Religious language in general and those words in particular have some seriously negative images stuck to them.

Take the word 'repentance.' If we think of it at all we probably think of beating ourselves up; telling ourselves how bad we are, how inferior or bull-headed or blind.

I'm not saying we shouldn't be honest with ourselves or ask for another's forgiveness if we've done some harm or resolve to change our ways. I'm saying excoriating ourselves and letting it stop there will be a plague upon us.

The notion that things will never change or that I will never change; that no matter what I say or do I am stuck forever in the mess I've made out of my life or the mess someone else has made out of my life; having no hope now or ever, that's full blown despair. It is a big problem for marriages and families and life in general; and as big a sin as pride will ever be because it separates us from the God-image imprinted on our hearts.

A little girl is abused by a male relative and forty years later she will not let anyone get close because she's keeping her promise never to let anyone hurt her again. Despair.

A breadwinner loses his job and for three months pounds the pavement for employment with nothing but rejection until his wife comes home and finds him sitting in front of the television with an empty six pack at his feet. Despair.

A moody teenager doesn't know what's wrong with him or how to talk about it because his father is chronically absent and his mother turns all their talks into sermons

on shaping up; so he finds some friends who are even moodier and angrier than he is and it makes him feel better. Despair.<sup>[i]</sup>

You can understand every one of those situations and you can understand the tentacles of fear and inner voice that says, 'this is the way it will always be' that keeps that woman and that unemployed man and that teenage boy down and defeated.

When John appeared on the scene despair was rampant. With an occupation army, corruption in high places including the church; the gap between rich and poor wider than ever despair had wrapped its plethora of constrictor-like arms around nearly everything and everyone in the society.

But John offers the people a way to cut through those tentacles; a way to free themselves from the self-defeating litany of 'I'm terrible, life is bad, nothing's going to change.' The act of 'repentance' is like wielding some Excalibur slashing through the python-grip of bad news and self-defeat.

I'm not saying we should feel guilty or bad if we fall from time to time into that grip. Life is hard. This week is not atypical: we lost a young mother to cancer, a vital older adult to pneumonia and currently have three members in the care of hospice.

Insidious as it is, despair even wraps itself around the shiny image of success. I wonder if Tiger Woods' troubles aren't a sign of the life being squeezed out of him. 14 majors; 80 tour wins; fabulous wealth; popular appeal; laudable charities; a beautiful family and some voice saying, 'Is that all there is? Why not break the pattern and reach for something that counters the drudgery of staying on top.'

Ultimately despair is self-serving whether it's an excuse for why I can't change or the reason behind driven ambition that is more about propping up the image of success than letting my life be a vehicle for God's will.

But John said we don't have to have the life squeezed out of us by our failure or success or the societal circumstances in which we live – if we open our lives to the power of God's presence. This is a message for a struggling economy in time of war.

The cast of characters at the start of today's story is a rogues' gallery of first century Palestine: 'the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Emperor Tiberius.' Think of the worst leader you can imagine, half a generation of his oppression and no end in sight.

'When Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea' – pragmatic and cynical – putting in time till his pension kicked in, Pilate would sell his mother-in-law at the drop of a hat. 'Herod ruler of Galilee' ruthless, pathological ethnic cleanser; 'during the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas' either of whom would make a money-grubbing televangelist look clean.

In other words, John was saying no matter what our circumstances – on the East Side of Buffalo or the East Side of Manhattan – if we shift our focus from our inability to God's possibility we can relax, breathe deeply and open our lives in new directions.

John was so convinced of this that he loved to quote the poet/prophet Isaiah who said that God will fill the valleys of our shortcomings; level the mountains of our burden; reform the crooked-hearted; smooth the rough memories of old hurt, and place a balm on the tender scars of old wounds.

We'll see God's salvation everywhere from the corporate ladder to the neighborhood coffee klatch.

That's what John offers today: a fresh start. A chance to reorient our lives because someone greater is coming. But for now, for the second week of Advent, when we are still far from 'Merry Christmas,' "Repent" is not a bad invitation.

It's a rough coat of camel's hair lined with hope that protects against the harsh winds of self-defeat. Repent says, 'get off the tread mill, look at ourselves more honestly, kindly; ready or not there's a poor couple coming about to give birth.'

Who would have guessed that deep change and joyful living would come from such a lowly source to a roomful of relatively well-heeled, well-educated Americans still searching for the cure to their despair? Amen.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Sermons on Suffering*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 24.