

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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December 5, 2021

Craig Janzen Neufeld

Last week our scriptures encouraged us to watch and to wait, to look for signs that something is a foot. Signs that may be big, but more often than naught, they're little. Signs that remind us that God has been, is, and will continue to be at work in the world, creating and recreating, unleashing the Holy Spirit, to wildly move, inspire, challenge, and encourage God's people. It was Jeremiah and Luke who reminded us that things are a foot and we're called to be prepared, to be alert. This week we have other prophets calling to us. Unlike last week where we were encouraged to look into the world and to hold to trust and faith that God is at work, this week we're being asked to change, a four letter word in the church if there ever was one. This week we're being asked to turn around, and reorient ourselves to God and God's purposes.

Depending on the lectionary year, John the Baptist's message of repentance typically comes on either the second or third week of Advent. And we've often interpreted it as a somewhat abrasive message. And frankly, how couldn't we, when it is filled with really charged language. Phrases like, "you brood of vipers" or "every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." John the baptist isn't the most tactful when trying to get his message across. John, perhaps, is a prime example of how sometimes it's not what you say, but how you say it. His message is one that is startling, it's perhaps a bit uncomfortable, and at the very least it's confrontational. However his words are spoken, I think what's being said underneath is worth paying attention to.

And at the core of his message is repentance. Repentance is all about changing our ways. It's not entirely about feeling contrite, it's not totally about confession, or shame or guilt, something the church has had the market cornered on for years. Repentance is ultimately about making a change in our lives. I once read somewhere, though I can't ever seem to find it again, a quote, "God loves us too much to let us remain as we are."

As much as the season of Advent is about preparing, and getting ready, a lot of the getting ready has to happen inside ourselves. To prepare us in the season of Advent, the prophets aren't interested in how early the tree is up, how early your shopping is done, or how many lights & decorations adorn your home, the prophets are worried about what's inside us, they're worried about our hearts, and our minds, our spirits, they force us to ask the question how are we oriented towards God? And what ways do we need to improve?

The prophets aren't just out there to "get us", they're not there to make us feel guilty, or to condemn us, they're not here to be doomsayers or to stir up trouble. Although sometimes one wonders given the language and imagery they use. I'm thinking Malachi right now with his refiners fire. Really, they want to encourage us. They want us to be better. We're often so distracted by their challenges or warnings that we forget or miss completely that they're there to give us something to look forward to. The prophets are here to point us towards God, to help us see what God is doing. They're here to encourage us to repent.

I confess that I don't really like to think about repentance as turning away from something, that's the traditional understanding of repentance; we're turning our backs on what we used to do, who we used to be, how we used to behave. I don't like that view because for the simple reason it's not emphasizing what we're turning towards, what we're striving for. When I was considering seminary and changing my career path, I was once asked was I running away from

something or running towards something, I now know it was the latter, the point, however, remains; do we turn away from, or turn towards. And I find it much more hopeful to run towards, to look forward to, or to strive for. Which is why I like to think about repentance as a turning towards, rather than a turning from.

And so what is it that we're turning towards. For me to say God and God's purposes, while it might be true it just sounds so academic. So what are other ways that we can dare to imagine what we're turning towards. A friend of mine once talked about how in Advent when we repent we're turning towards God and embracing God's dream. And I rather like that. When we repent, we turn toward God and latch onto God's dream. God's dream of what? God's dream of a world of peace, and justice, of love and care, of hope, of joy. But more than that, I think repentance in a Christian perspective is more than us simply embracing God's vision for the world, it's more than reorienting our work and purposes, it's also an embracing of God and in turn, accepting God's embrace. And this it is this last bit where the change and transformation occurs.

As I listen to the story of God and God's people, as I listen to scripture, it's hard for me to ignore how much God wants to be involved in the lives of God's people. God is described as a parent, we're described as the children of God. Jesus is also named Emmanuel, 'God with us'. The second story of creation describes God walking in creation calling out to Adam and Eve. God wants to be near, God wants to be apart of our lives. God sends prophets to call the people of God back into God's loving embrace.

In contrast to the way some Christian faith traditions describe God who is at a distance, who holds us at arms length, I believe God's intent is quite the opposite. I believe God wants to be close and to hold us close, and we're the ones who run away. We're the ones who keep God at arms length. We're the ones who turn our backs on God. And so for me repentance, is a turning back to God, and accepting the love and embrace that God offers.

In his book, *Messy Spirituality*, author Mike Yaconelli writes about the movie *The Great Santini*.

"All his life, Bull (the father) has been fighting the demons of his childhood with a father who was never satisfied, always demanding more from his son. Bull and his oldest son, Ben, have a very close relationship, which begins to fall apart as the son matures.

Late one evening, Bull returns home drunk, and lashes out, and things turn violent. When the screaming and crying die down, Bull stumbles backward and drunkenly realizes he has come to the edge of destroying his marriage and his family. Humiliated, angry and mostly incoherent, he backs away from his family and storms outside.

Later, once everyone is quieted down, Ben finds his mother standing on the porch, 'I'm getting worried' she says, 'Your father may be in trouble.'

"Good," Ben snaps, "I hope he dies."

"No you don't," his mother protests, "I want you to go get him."

Ben reluctantly searches for his father in the empty streets near their house. At last, he finds Bull slumped against a tree mumbling a sad imaginary dialogue with his father. As the son listens to his father's tearful words, he begins to understand why his dad is the way he is. Finally, Bull lays down on the grass, crying, and his son stoops to pick him up.

"Come on, Dad, let's go home. I think I understand now."

As he picks up his father, he gently says, "I love you, Dad." Bull pushes him away and staggers across the park. Ben, angry at first, keeps saying, "I love you, Dad. I love you." Bull tries to escape his son, but Ben starts circling him, taunting him, "I love you, Dad. Come on, Dad, I love you! Stop me, Dad, come on, stop me! I love you, Dad."

Finally, when it becomes clear to Bull that he cannot escape or run away from his son's love, Ben picks him up and helps him home.

Bull is angered by his son's unconditional, relentless, stubborn love. No matter how ugly he becomes, his son refuses to stop loving him. He doesn't deserve Ben's love, and he knows it. He has been a flawed, bullheaded father. He has failed many times--too many. He tries to drown out Ben's words, but he can't.

Ben reminds us of a God who refuses to stop loving us no matter the mess we've made of our lives."¹

This, I believe, is what we turn towards when we repent, we turn towards this unrelenting, perhaps even annoying, embrace of God.

The struggle, the challenge, is in the turning. Like Bull in the story, it's sometimes difficult accept that embrace; it's sometimes difficult to let go of what we know and accept the inexplicable embrace of God. Sometimes, it's humbling, sometimes it's embarrassing, sometimes it means facing a side of ourselves we'd rather not face; and this is the refining that I hear in Malachi, this is the making straight that John is preaching about. Sometimes it's hard work to turn to face God and accept that ever loving embrace. However when we do, it is in the arms of God where we find hope in grace, we find God's reassuring peace, we find a comforting joy, and an unconditional love.

God arms are open wide, ready and waiting to hold us again, and again, and again. God's embrace holds and supports us in our struggles; and joyously embraces us in our celebrations. God, more than anything else, wants to be close to us, near to us, surrounding us with love, and grace, and mercy, and care. This is the God we turn towards when we repent. This is what I hear John calling us to, even if he uses different words, this is what I hear Malachi's prophecy pointing us towards; God, who wants nothing more than to love us, and hold us.

Dare we imagine this loving embrace?

Amen

In response please join me in singing "Comfort, Comfort, O My People" (VT 212)

¹ Yaconelli, Mike. *Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002. pgs 125-126.