

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on December 6, 2020.

CHANGING DIRECTION

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke 3:3

Today is the second Sunday in Advent. The devotional that many of you are following suggests that the focus for the second week in Advent is “Changing Direction.” In the Gospel reading for today we heard the story of John the Baptist. We are told that **John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** In all the synoptic gospels John’s message is very clear and can be reduced to a single word, repent. John came to the people of Israel and told them, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”**

I believe that when we hear the term repent, we think we know what it means. All too often the term repent conjures up an image of a person standing on a street corner in New York City with a sandwich sign that declares “repent, the end is near.” Our typical understanding of the term repent means feeling sorry for our sins. When some calls on us to repent, they usually are referring to some specific thing we have done or said. We usually think the primary meaning of repentance is feeling guilty for our mistakes.

I believe that the understanding of repentance as merely feeling sorry for our sins misses the heart of the meaning. Metanoia is the Greek word that we translate as repent. Metanoia denotes movement. Repentance does not mean just confession. It is not merely a means of getting rid of guilt. Repentance means to turn, to change direction. It means to alter the direction of our lives.

The process that is metanoia might best be understood through a story.

In 1967, Johnny Cash was in trouble. By then, he was a major figure in country music with several successful songs including *“Folsom Prison Blues”* and *“I Walk the Line,”* as well as a religious album, *Hymns by Johnny Cash.*

Even with his great success and critical acclaim, Cash was deeply addicted to amphetamines and barbiturates, which he was taking several times a day and by the handful.

He wrote in his autobiography, **“I was cancelling shows and recording dates, and when I did manage to show up, I couldn't sing because my throat was too dried out from the pills. I was in and out of jails, hospitals, car wrecks. I was a walking vision of death, and that's exactly how I felt.”**

Because his drug use isolated him from family, friends, colleagues, Cash felt abandoned, lonely and completely hopeless. So, in early October 1967, he decided to end his life. **“I never wanted to see another dawn,”** he said later. **“I had wasted my life. I had drifted so far away from God and every stabilizing force in my life that I felt there was no hope for me.”**

Cash made his way to Nickajack Cave on the Tennessee River just north of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

This was a system of caves, some larger than two or three football stadiums, that ran under the mountains all the way to Alabama. For decades, the caves attracted the curious and

provided shelter for fugitives. Cash had previously explored the caves with friends looking for Civil War and Native American artifacts. He knew several people had lost their lives in the caves across the years, usually by entering and then losing their way. He tells us **“It was my hope and intention to join that company.”** His plan was well thought out. He would crawl in so far that he would never find his way out and no-one would be able to locate him until he was dead.

Cash parked his Jeep, entered the cave and crawled for nearly three hours until his flashlight batteries wore out. Exhausted, he lay down in total darkness. **“The absolute lack of light was appropriate, for at that moment I was as far from God as I had ever been,”** Cash remembered.

“My separation from Him, the deepest and most ravaging of the various kinds of loneliness I'd felt over the years, seemed finally complete.”

As he lay in the darkness waiting for death, Cash discovered a profound truth about God. **“I thought I'd left Him, but He hadn't left me.”** He began to feel something powerful taking place in his mind and body, **“a sensation of utter peace, clarity and sobriety.”** It was a feeling that defied his intellect.

The feeling of tranquility persisted, and Cash began to focus on God. **“There in Nickajack Cave I became conscious of a very clear, simple idea: I was not in charge of my destiny. I was not in charge of my own death. I was going to die at God's time, not mine. I hadn't prayed over my decision to seek death in the cave, but that hadn't stopped God from intervening.”** Feeling the stirring of new hope, Cash found himself in a predicament. He was in total darkness, with no idea of which way was up, down, in or out of the maze of tunnels and caves. Deep inside the earth, there was no scent, light or sensation from the outside to guide him out. **“How can I escape from the death I've willed?”** he wondered.

His answer came in an intuitive urging to simply begin moving. **“So,”** he recalled, **“I started crawling in whatever direction suggested itself, feeling ahead with my hands to guard against plunging over some precipice, just moving slowly and calmly, crablike.”** Eventually, Cash felt a gentle, soft breeze and knew that the direction the breeze was flowing from would lead to a way out. Slowly, methodically, he followed the breeze until he began to see light and finally, the opening of the cave.

Amazingly, when he emerged, June Carter and his mother were there with a basket of food and drink. The women told Cash they knew something was wrong and felt led to come and find him.

Driving back to Nashville, he told them, **“God saved me from killing myself.”** Cash further said he was ready to commit himself to God and **“do whatever it took to get off drugs.”** He kept his promise and slowly recovered and regained strength and sanity.

This story is an illustration of the meaning of repentance. Cash had moved deeper into the cave away from life and God and when he repented, he began to move in a new direction.

John the Baptist asks us to view sin in a different way. Sin is not understood to be just isolated indiscretions or transgressions. Sin is a force that draws us in a certain direction. Sin is a path we follow. Sin is like driving down a wrong road or crawling into a cave.

It seems to me that repentance is a process with several steps.

Repentance begins when we realize that we are going in the wrong direction. Cash came

to the realization he was at a dead end. In the story of the Prodigal Son we are told that after squandering his wealth, the son came to his senses and realized what he had done. He realized that his whole life was on a trajectory to destruction and so he turned and headed home.

John the Baptist tells us that we are headed in the wrong direction. In many ways we are not following the path towards God. The first step in repentance is acknowledging that we are moving away from God. As the old general prayer of confession reminds us – we have erred and strayed from God's ways like lost sheep. Sheep who have wandered in the wrong direction.

I believe that there are many times that we get so caught up in our daily routines that we become distracted. You and I may slowly be moving away from God without even being aware of it. We can easily turn off onto detours that keep us from moving towards God's purpose for us.

The process of repentance begins by admitting that we have not allowed our whole life to be molded by God. We have sinned and fallen short of his intentions for us. But confessing our sin is not enough.

The second step is to believe that we can change. Many of us think that we are on a road with no exits and no U-turns allowed. It has almost become conventional wisdom that human beings are trapped by genes and environment.

The words of John the Baptist are words of hope. They contain within them the belief that real change is possible. We can take responsibility for our lives. We can become different people. We are not trapped by genetics or environment. Real change is possible.

When we have recognized we need to change,
and when we come to believe change is possible,
Then we must want to change.

Cash came to realize God had not given up on him, so he should not give up on himself. John the Baptist came preaching "**Repent!**" He tells us to move in a new direction. John is not primarily telling us to turn away from certain activities and lifestyles. He is rather asking us to turn towards God. He tells us to turn to the kingdom of heaven which is coming in Jesus. John's message is positive. He is telling us to turn away from our sins in order to move towards Jesus.

I believe that we often miss the point of the Gospel. It seems to me so much of evangelical Christianity has focused on making people feel guilty. The formula for finding Christian faith in revivalism, which started about two hundred years ago, starts with making people feel as guilty as possible. Some churches made card playing, dancing and consumption of alcohol into sins in part to make people feel guilty. So many people participated in these activities that it was easy to hold them up and make a large group of people feel guilty.

When Evangelists had people feeling guilty then they offered them the forgiveness of Christ. Christ was a means to overcoming these sins. They could feel good about themselves when they had quit their habits.

The repentance that we find in the New Testament seems to me quite a different process. The Gospel focuses on the wonder, glory, and joy found in the love of God displayed in Jesus Christ. We are to turn from our sins and mistakes in order to receive something better, something more fulfilling which is the love of Christ itself.

So, John the Baptist calls on us to turn from our sin in order that we might turn towards Jesus.

New beginnings are possible when we turn from our sin and towards Jesus. Listen to these words from a Chaplin who served in Iraq:

In a service last month, I was giving the words of invitation to the Lord's Supper. I explained that this sacrament is for believers in Jesus Christ and for those who want to know the gracious love of God the Father. I went on to say that we come to the table not because we are good, but because God is good. Even if you have done bad things in the past come ask for forgiveness and be made new in Christ.

When the service was over, a young Sergeant came up to me with tears in her eyes. I knew her from Bible Studies that I had led that she was a new believer. What I didn't know served as a powerful reminder of the sacred calling I have as Chaplin. She told me that this was the first time she had ever taken communion! She didn't grow up attending church and she had lived a hard life. That night, she didn't feel worthy to participate in the Lord's Supper. When I explained that communion is open to all believers who sincerely want to experience Christ's love, regardless of a sinful past, she felt compelled to come forward.

This month, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we always remember the reason why he came: to deliver us from the bondage of our past life, and to restore us, renew us and give us hope.

John the Baptist calls on us to turn away from all those things which lead us away from God. He tells us to turn away from those things of the world that cannot satisfy us to the one who promises to feed us with his love. He tells us to empty our hands that we might receive the gift of God himself.

During this Advent Season may we look at our lives and turn away from those things that lead us down dead ends. You and I have made false turns and taken detours in our lives. It is possible for us to change direction. We can turn from our mistakes, sins and oversights and turn to Jesus who promises us forgiveness, acceptance and joy, both in this life and in the world to come.

On this second Sunday in Advent, John the Baptist asks us this simple question –

“In what direction are you heading?”

Are you moving towards God

or are you drifting away from Him?

If you are moving away turn around –

change direction and

discover Christ anew.

May the words of John the Baptist help us discover a power higher than ourselves.