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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2022

Lectionary Year A: Matthew 3:1-12

Countless newly minted clergy from a variety of denominations have, not long after graduating from seminary, gone out to their first parish to save poor souls from their erroneous ways. In fact, it's impossible to help oneself after having spent three years in seminary learning how to do things the right way to restrain oneself when one arrives somewhere and finds all the things that are done wrong. And, of course, one never bothers to ask longtime members of the parish about the history of their more peculiar ways (because they're wrong, anyway), so one proceeds to rearrange the furniture shortly after one is installed.

Typically, doing this sort of thing requires one to be young, ambitious, and fearless, and (thankfully) youth, ambition, and fearlessness all inevitably diminish over time, which tends to make one easier to live with. This is not to say that ambition turns to laziness or that fearlessness turns to timidity; instead, the accumulation of wisdom over the years helps one to see more angles, nuances, and subtleties in what used to be matters of simply right and wrong. Priorities change and, in this case, listening becomes more important than being right. The parish's story assumes a status higher than one's own agenda.

I had to learn these lessons the hard way, because there was once a time when I was newly minted clergy arriving in my first parish, having followed an evangelical Scotswoman who wasn't exactly a devotee of liturgy. But even learning

the hard way showed me that changes are best made incrementally, and only after gaining the trust of and a rapport with the congregation. In retrospect, it surprises me how forgiving they actually were. They had seen their share of rookies, as I recall.

Learning how to live with people and accept them the way they are is the broader lesson that I continue to learn. But when I read the prophets in the Bible, of whom John the Baptist would be one, I get the impression that they didn't live with the people they prophesied to -- and if they did, they had to have been hated. They told people things they didn't want to hear...even more so than Jesus ever did. But Jesus knew something about this, as well, as he once observed, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (Luke 4:24). Itineracy was, perhaps, a better idea for a prophet, because then the prophet can leave town before having to deal with any of the fallout of his or her prophecy. This morning's Gospel text notes that "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea" (Matthew 3:1), which indicates that he probably didn't have much for a permanent residence; his diet of locusts and wild honey would be another indication of his tentative living situation. And, not surprisingly, he issues a call given by countless prophets before him: "Repent" (Matthew 3:2a).

Prophets aren't shy when it comes to pointing out to people what they're doing wrong and telling them what is right. Remembering, again, that prophets often don't live with those to whom they prophesy, they can get away with this more! But they're on a mission, for sure; they jolt people out of their complacency and stir up their hearts for what is to come. It is important, too, to realize that the prophet is serious, and John the Baptist is no exception. His call to

repentance is no mere plea for penitence, as in, "Gee, God, I'm really sorry for what I did last Tuesday." Rather, it is a demand for a 180-degree turn of one's heart and mind to the God of this Advent -- this Advent being the coming of the Lord.

Our Gospel text would indicate that at least some of John the Baptist's audience needs a jolt out of complacency. Listen again to his words to the Pharisees and Sadducees: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matthew 3:7b-9). John the Baptist, in no uncertain terms, tells these people that, in this case, ancestry offers no advantage or security to them in light of the Lord's impending Advent. Everyone -- no matter who they are -- needs to make that 180-degree turn and drop their old habits and assumptions regarding God.

And as Christians, we can translate this into "Everyone is going to need Jesus."

As a testament to their repentance, the people are baptized by John to go on their way preparing for the Lord. Most importantly, John realizes that he is only the forerunner and not the main event; he says, "One who is more powerful than I is coming after me" and "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11). To this day, our sacramental understanding of Holy Baptism includes, not surprisingly, repentance and the Holy Spirit; in the rite itself, those being baptized (or their sponsors) renounce their old ways and are sealed by the Holy Spirit. This, in effect, brings together John's "forerunner" baptism with the baptism of Jesus, thereby completing what is for us

the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. And, when you find John the Baptist calling you to repentance, you can return to the waters where you were made a child of God, and make that 180-degree rotation back towards God.

But because we all need Jesus, even John the Baptist jolts us out of our complacency and demands a 180-degree turn from us. Since moving to Indiana, I've learned what a "Michigan left" is, informally, at least. Back up North, we'd call it a "U-turn," but the end result is the same. It's a 180-degree turn, usually completed after one has headed the wrong way. New Testament Greek uses the word metanoia for "repentance," and metanoia really captures the concept of that 180-degree "U-turn." But note that, when we're driving, we almost exclusively make those 180-degree turns in order to correct a mistake. If we didn't do that, we'd keep going in the wrong direction and it would take an incredible stroke of luck to arrive at the right place.

But, you know, cities will often post "No U-Turn" signs; small towns would post them to discourage "cruising" up and down Main Street. And U-turns are prohibited elsewhere for various reasons, usually relating to traffic safety. But in your life, because of God's grace, U-turns of repentance are always permitted. So, how does a U-turn for the season of Advent sound? It doesn't matter which wrong direction you've been headed down...now is the time you can turn around and get going on the right path. If you keep going the wrong way, things might not turn out so well, but, thanks to God's grace, you'll get another chance to return to him and prepare for our Lord's Advent. Take anything and everything bad that you've done and whatever path it has taken you down -- and make a U-turn, and turn your back on it. God has the right path for you, and you can, in John's words, "bear fruit worthy of repentance" (Matthew 3:8).

You can "bear fruit" by then taking the right way after your U-turn. But be sure to straighten yourself out and don't concern yourself with straightening everyone else out. One thing I've had to learn as a clergyperson is that, ninety-nine percent of the time, I am not a prophet, and there is very little I can do to preach people out of their erroneous ways. Today, in particular, I'm letting John the Baptist do that work, because he is a much more worthy preparer of the way of the Lord than I am. And, provided the circumstances are not grave, there is little about you that I'd readily identify as wrong.

Again, I've learned this the hard way -- over a long time and after many mistakes. But God gave me and continues to give me the opportunity to "hang a Michigan left" or make a "U-turn" and find the right way. That's God's grace at work through the call to repentance. And we know that this grace of God is real because of the One we prepare the way for -- Jesus Christ. Through him, all things become right...including us.

Amen.