

Matthew 3:1-12, Isaiah 11:1-10; Advent 2A, 12/4/22
Pastor Ellen Schoepf

I have a quotation by theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, hanging above my desk and I read it every week. His words have meaning for me as I work on my sermon. This is what he said, “People have an idea that the preacher is an actor on a stage and they are the critics, blaming or praising him [or her]. What they don’t know is that **they** are the actors on the stage; he [or she] (the preacher) is merely the prompter standing in the wings, reminding them of their lost lines.” In other words, as we gather to worship, the liturgy that we experience week after week, that work of the people, is a work that **we** do. We **hear** the readings and proclamation of Scripture and then we **act out** the Gospel in the ritual drama of a meal. We believe that **God** acts in our words and, in that ritual of drama making, the Gospel happens. And then, that work of the people happens not simply in the context of Sunday morning worship, it continues to happen as we leave worship and live our lives throughout the week. I really appreciate Kierkegaard’s words when he says the gathered people are the actors and the preacher is the prompter standing in the wings reminding the people of their lost lines.

I am reminded of Kierkegaard’s words as we hear today’s gospel reading about this unkempt, eccentric preacher, John the Baptist. John is

the one standing in the wings of the wilderness on the banks of the Jordan river, crying out lost lines to the actors saying, “This is it! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Turn around, turn back to God.” And, I have to say that for someone who might be considered a “prompter standing in the wings,” **he** is the one who is stealing the show.

You just gotta love John the Baptist. He is such a colorful figure. I love it when he appears on the scene each Advent. This intriguing, eccentric, prophetic figure is the one who introduces us to the narratives of Jesus’ ministry in all the gospels. And, in Matthew, he bursts on the scene with this fiery, passionate, colorful language as he proclaims his message of repentance.

So, what is repentance? When we look at the word, *metanoia*, which is the Greek word for repentance in scripture, it refers to far more than simply being or saying one is sorry for past sins. It is far more than mere regret or remorse for such sins. While that is in part what repentance means, the heart of the word refers to a turning **away** from the past way of life and turning **to** the inauguration of a **new** one. It literally means, “If you’re on the wrong road, **turn around** and go the other way!”

Another understanding of repentance, one that I find so meaningful, comes from Lutheran theologian, Richard Jensen. He describes

repentance as it relates to baptism. And, by the way, baptism **is** something that John the Baptist is **doing** as he calls people to repent. Jensen writes:

The daily baptismal experience has many names. It may be called *repentance*. Unfortunately, repentance is often understood as an "I can" experience. "I am sorry for my sins. I *can* do better. I *can* please you, God." So often we interpret repentance as **our** way of turning to God. That **cannot** be. Christianity is **not** about an individual turning **to** God. Christianity is about **God turning to us**.

In repenting, therefore, we ask the God who has [already] turned towards us, buried us in baptism and raised us to new life, to continue his work of putting us to death. Repentance is an "**I can't**" experience. To repent is to volunteer for death. Repentance asks that the "death of self" which God began to work in us in baptism continue to this day. The repentant person comes before God saying, "*I can't* do it myself, God. Kill me and give me new life. You buried me in baptism. Bury me again today. Raise me to a new life." That is the language of repentance. Repentance is a **daily** experience that **renews** our baptism. [*Touched by the Spirit*, p. 49]

I would add that we should note the command to "Repent," as we find it in today's reading, is in present tense. This denotes continual or repeated actions: "Keep on repenting!" "Continually be repentant!" It isn't like a door we pass through once that gets us into the kingdom.

Repentance is the **ongoing lifestyle** of the people in the kingdom of God. And, repentance and its seal in baptism signal another theme to be sounded repeatedly in Matthew's gospel: God's power is present, but it is **not unrelated** to what we do. One thing is clear for Matthew, God's power calls for and enables a transformed new life of **discipleship**. Repentance

then directs our vision not so much to sorrow for the past, but to the promise of a **new beginning**. The promise is that, because God's reign is so near, it has the power to bring about this new orientation of life.

And what is this new orientation? Well, it is Gods' vision for this world, God's deep desire for peace and equity for all people. It is what we find in Isaiah's vision in our first reading today, Isaiah's hope-filled vision for all of creation. In Isaiah, we are given images of **God's dream** for this world – images of righteousness, of equity, of peace, of the cessation of harm and war, of the unity of all nations under the rule of God. As people who live into the reign of God, that is people who live into the presence and power of God, we live into a world where God's reign is so near it has the power to bring about this new orientation of life.

I find it interesting that dreams, especially **hope-filled** dreams, have a way of shaping what it is we are enabled to see. One theologian suggests, "Hope-filled dreams are like lenses that train us to interpret and to act in the present. Each generation learns to dream the visions that are taught by those who have dreamed before and by those who are able to keep dreaming in the present. To borrow a metaphor, every Christian needs to have a 'hope chest.'"

Every Christian needs to have a “hope chest.” For Christians, our *hope chest* holds this vision of **God’s dream for the world**. And, so we dream not just about what is, but about what it might be if God's reign, God’s kingdom, is indeed drawing near. God invites us to dream something beyond what we can presently see. We are invited to dream God’s dream about a different world where there is no predator or prey, no fear or hatred. And, this is the dream that sets our course as we live into the reign of God, as we live into the presence and power of what God is **already** doing in this world.

So, on this second Sunday of Advent as we prepare our hearts to make room for Christ’s arrival, I encourage you to turn around, turn toward God who has **already** turned toward you, and live into God’s dream for the world. I think we will again be surprised at what God is up to. We will again be surprised that the God of the universe was willing to enter into **our** very lives and **our** history and take on **our** vulnerability in order to give us **hope**. The God we know in Jesus comes to earth, into our very existence, to take on our lot and our life and give us hope by being with us and for us, **inviting** us into abundant life, life that truly matters and has meaning. And, this God who comes down out of heaven to pitch a tent among us in the person of Jesus, is inviting us to live into God’s dream for this world,

helping us to see in the face of our neighbor, **not** a competitor for scarce resources, **not** an enemy, **not** a person to fear, but a sibling in Christ, our very own kin.

Yes, John the Baptist is standing in the wings prompting **us** and giving **us** our lost lines. He is there pointing beyond himself to God, telling us the advent of a new age is upon us. He is telling us that, in the person of Jesus, God is guiding us as we move through the wilderness of life and live into God's kingdom of hope and love.