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Sermon for Advent II

December 6, 2020

Calling Us Home

When I lived in Chicago, there was a street preacher who stood at the corner of State Street at the entrance of the Old Navy. Every time I went downtown he was there shouting into a microphone and portable speaker. Preaching hellfire and brimstone. Judgement for sins. I remember whenever I wanted to go to the Old Navy, I’d try to slip past him quickly and discreetly. Even though I was a Christian, I didn’t want to be called out on the microphone. I just wanted some affordable jeans!

I’m sure the fiery street preacher is what some of us imagine when we hear about John the Baptist, as in this morning’s reading from Mark — the wild man out in the desert going up and down the banks of the Jordan shouting, “Repent!” Today’s Collect even frames his message as a “warning” to heed. So when we come to his readings in Advent, maybe we hope we can sort of slip past him, like me trying to get into the Old Navy, not wanting to get caught in the crosshairs of his message.

If that’s how we’re experiencing John, though, it may have less to do with what he was actually saying and more to do with the way the world looks at offenses. Because John’s message was about how we deal with our sin and mistakes in a redemptive way. But in the world we live in, messing up can be a scary thing. So often, the message we get is if you mess up you have to pay. We can think of current examples where people are fired for minor things or people lose everything over something they did as teenagers. We ask ourselves, why do people only come forward when they get caught? But why would anyone come forward given what awaits them? There is little incentive for apology because we don’t know how to forgive and give second chances. It’s been said that public shaming and ostracism are en vogue right now, and that there’s an unforgiving nature to the moment we’re in. One in which people are becoming more afraid to make mistakes and speak up, the very ways we learn and grow.

If that’s our experience of confronting wrong, it’s no wonder we brace ourselves when we hear John the Baptist say “repent.” It’s understandable, but it’s not how it has to be

We don’t have to be afraid of God’s call to repentance because it’s everything the world’s is not.

God does call us to repent — to look at where we’ve done wrong, acknowledge it, make amends and continue differently. But in no way is repentance meant to shame us, or punish us. Paul says in Romans there is no condemnation for those in Christ. God’s call to repent is done out of the greatest love. It’s like a parent who needs to correct a child for bad behavior. The parent doesn’t want to embarrass their child. But neither do they want the child to hurt themselves or someone else with such behavior down the line.

God urges us to examine and turn from wrong with our best interest in mind; meeting us with forgiveness and grace when we do. In what would be a moment of shame, we instead come face to face with how profoundly loved we are.

Just as importantly, and in contrast to society’s way, is that with God our sin and mistakes do not alienate us or jeopardize our belonging. Quite the opposite! God uses our transgressions as the opportunity to draw us in closer. The Greek word for repentance means to turn. To turn away from whatever we were doing and start moving in the direction that leads us to God. So then, by calling us to repent, God is calling us in. Saying, Come back in my direction. Come back where you belong. At the most fundamental level, it’s an invitation to come home.

It’s like what we see in our Isaiah reading, where the prophet tells the people of Israel who are exiled in Babylon that God is doing a new thing, restoring them. Even for those who have strayed and gone their own way, the message is, it’s time to come home. Describing God’s activity, the prophet says: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” What if we thought of repentance and forgiveness not in harsh terms, but like being gathered like a lamb in a shepherd’s arms, or being gently led back to where we belong?

In a similar way, what if we rethought how we look at John the Baptist? What if rather than seeing him as the street preacher shouting at us, we imagine John going along the banks of the river Jordan calling out — “Olly olly oxen free” — that phrase used in children’s games to say those hiding, it’s okay, you can come out now. It’s thought that the phrase comes from “all ye, all ye outs in free,” or possibly “calling all the "outs" in free”; in other words, all who are out may come in without penalty. Which again, call to mind Isaiah’s words of comfort to Jerusalem, calling her back, saying her penalty had been paid.

This is what John’s message of repentance is: telling us, it’s okay to come out from hiding; we have a safe place to look at our wrongs, and where we’ve fallen short; those things are not who we are; it’s not where we belong; it’s time to come home. This view makes so much sense when we think of how, in addition to calling for repentance, John was also baptizing people. Baptism is about being cleansed and dying to the old way for a new start. It is also an initiation rite of being brought into the community. In repentance followed by baptism, the vulnerability of acknowledging fault and accepting responsibility is met with a belonging in community; a new start; a chance at redemption.

And once we have experienced the power of this for ourselves, *we* then get to be the messengers. We get to be the ones who are just as on fire about calling people in as John was. The ones who use mistakes as the occasion for learning and growth. Who create spaces where people feel like they can mess up and learn from it, rather than being silent, hiding, and potentially going further into prejudice. We can be the ones who confront wrong with love and then invite people to be allies in working for justice. What if in an unforgiving time we were just as passionate about God’s grace, and forgiveness, and living out this alternative way?

In this second week of Advent, John is calling us into something wonderful. A way to deal with sin and error in a way that is redemptive and restorative. Can we see it for the beautiful invitation that it is? Can we see that we don’t have to slip past the desert preacher? In God, it is safe to come out. It is time to come home.

AMEN