

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”
Luke 3:7-8a

Repentance

I don't know how many Presbyterian pastors preach the lectionary. I don't think it was common at all back in the day, and many folks are still not familiar with the liturgical year or the lectionary. But I think that the lectionary has helped us standardize the narrative arc of the Advent season, so during Advent we are used to hearing one Sunday pointing to Christ's second coming, at least one Sunday referencing John the Baptist calling for repentance, one Sunday on Mary's pregnancy, and the leadup to Jesus' birth.

There are many images of John—prophet, forerunner and rival of Jesus, cousin of Jesus, evangelist, baptizer, preacher, and, let's face it, wild man yelling out in the desert. His message, delivered with shocking invective, is supposed to be the good news that salvation comes through repentance. I'm sure most people ignored him—I doubt he'd be able to do what he did in the middle of genteel society, which is probably why he was out in the wilderness, in his clothes of camel's hair eating his diet of locusts and wild honey. In spite of being pretty “off the grid,” he managed to attract some followers, whom he greets with affectionate terms like “you brood of vipers.”

Repentance is the act of changing one's thinking, away from self-centered sin and towards God. But honestly, I have to wonder how people listened to this very unusual, passionate, and brutally graphic prophet—would he be your idea of someone to receive guidance from? And what would you need to repent from?

My imagination has led me to consider that those who listened to John were willing to recognize the divine wisdom of this wild man, and that they must have been willing to repent from the good common sense that we are used to. And if I had to apply this scenario to today's world, it reminds me of the many suggestions to Democrats of what they need to change to win back the many folks who turned to Donald Trump, who uses graphic and almost violent language to demand change, and who has succeeded in attracting some seriously passionate followers.

Of the many theories of what Democrats must repent from, the most intriguing to me has been a self-proclaimed moral superiority. I'm sure that I am guilty of this too many times to count! But what I remember best are the times when I have felt that arrogance directed towards me, especially by well-educated dominant culture liberals who see my Asian-ness or learn of my Christian faith, and assume I am conservative or not woke enough, and are happy to teach or correct me when I do not align with the proper vocabulary of the moment. This became most clear during discussions about an overture to last summer's General Assembly, when I realized how reticent I was to attempt to articulate my concerns for fear of the backlash that I'd face. When I did write to one colleague, I felt the need to first list my “cred” by pointing to the decades my family and I have been vocal advocates for the cause—he then publicly pointed to his own advocacy, and others followed suit, because we live in such a polarized society that if you don't follow the most outspoken thought leaders, you're dismissed as ignorant or behind the times, or worse.

But, we ask, why would we step back from offering our insights that so benefit the world? Thank God for Scripture reminding us to “live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly, do not claim to be wiser than you are.” (*Romans 12:16*) We would need a small dose

of this Scripture lesson just to open to the possibility that we were wrong, especially considering where this new guidance might be coming from!

As we await again the coming of the Lord breaking into our human history, may we remember that when God's beloved child came into this world, he came not to a palace but to a cow's stall, and the heavenly messengers announced his birth not to the rich and powerful but to shepherds. If the Savior of the world entrusts those most lowly outsiders with this astounding truth, how do we open to the wisdom that God is giving to the outsiders of our world today?

As we enter into these days of wonder, may we keep our eyes open to the blessings that God offers, even if they are borne by the most unlikely agents of grace.

Praying and waiting,

Wendy