

TURN, TURN, TURN

Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

Faith Community
December 7, 2008

Introduction

As we begin to read the first chapter of Mark's gospel you might expect to hear about angels, a bright star, the birth of a baby, and some wise men and shepherds. But none of that is here.

Instead of all these delightful accounts we associate with Christmas, we find a wild man out in the wilderness; he's got a camel pelt wrapped around him, which is held by a leather belt. He eats locusts and wild honey, and he's ranting. It all looks and sounds pretty scary.

But the message he is telling is far from scary – the Son of God is coming into the world. Get ready! Repent! Change the direction of your life. There's a whole new opportunity before us.

He is talking about a chance to align your life with God's will. You can turn around and let God change you. Your life can be better.

Even though he seems like a wild man shouting in the wilderness, people are flooding out to hear his message of hope. He may look like wild, but his word is good news.

I

Many people today are ready to hear John the Baptist's cry – repent. That word “repent” in Greek literally means “To change your mind.” It is about changing the direction of your life. It means to turn around. Like people in John the Baptist's day, lots of people today feel like their life is headed in the wrong direction. Maybe they feel controlled by something – drugs, sex or alcohol; or maybe they feel like their priorities aren't the right ones. Life gets tiring, even boring, when it's all about me. At some point, maybe we realize that being a whole person is more important than having the right things.

A Methodist bishop requires each of his District Superintendants to spend at least one hour per week with someone who is suffering and not free – a drug addict, an alcoholic, someone in an abusive situation, a person with a horrible disease. Why does he do this? Because, he says, he wants to remind his leaders why Jesus came to us – he is our savior, redeemer, and deliverer.

John the Baptist is saying to people of his day and ours, “You must repent.” Turn your life around, make a dramatic change – a U-Turn – so that God can heal your life. Change the direction you're going. God can make your life so much better.

II

Many people have made that dramatic change and turned to God. They have turned around, and are trying to live in faithful relationship with God. It's not an easy road.

Maybe you are trying to live faithfully, but you're stuck in a rut. Your faith is a routine, not an adventure. Maybe you realize that some parts of your life are still unhealthy, or you are still putting some things before God.

It could be we don't need to make a dramatic U-Turn, but a correction of direction; not a complete overhaul, but a little tuning up.

Maybe you trust in God but don't know a lot about your faith. You're kind of living on the surface of faith without going deeper into what it means.

Or you might find that you live your faith well on Sundays, but have trouble in the middle of the week when you realize that a slip in honesty could pay off well, or that you'd look better in your boss's eyes if you weren't exactly truthful about your accountability.

The words of John the Baptist - and later Jesus - are that we can repent – we can turn around. The good news is that Christ continues to make change possible for us. God is still with us, helping us find our way. Even when we don't need to make huge changes, God stands with us to clear the barriers that block our relationship.

The great preacher, Fred Craddock, tells of going, as a young man, to his minister to get help. Fred had been baptized two years earlier and was trying to live a faithful life.

A few weeks earlier he was working in a box factory and he and some of his friends went up the street to get a hot dog for lunch. They still had on their nail aprons from work. On the way they passed a blind man on the sidewalk with his guitar and a sign that said, "I'm blind, please help me." He had taped a tin can to his guitar.

As they walked by the three workers took nails from their aprons and dropped them in the tin can. It made a loud clanking noise. The blind man said, "Thank you, thank you very much. May God bless you. Thank you."

What he had done began to eat at Fred. What an ugly, terrible thing to do. The horrible feeling wouldn't go away. Craddock says, "I couldn't get rid of it, so finally I did what some people do only in desperation; I talked to the minister."

He told him what he had done. The minister sat up in his chair and said, "Are you aware that our country is in the biggest war in its history?" (It was during the last year of World War Two). "People are dying by the hundreds every day; soldiers have been away from their families for years. We don't even know how this whole thing is going with people dying and starving, and you're worried about some nails in a blind man's cup." Fred walked out of his office disappointed, and still troubled.

Finally, he went to the woman who volunteered as the youth worker at their church. He told her what he had done. She said, "It was a terrible, terrible thing you did."

Then she told him that God forgives him for what he did, but suggested that he go to that blind man next week and tell him what he had done and ask for his forgiveness; maybe give him some money this time. Fred went, and the kind man forgave him. And then he smiled and said, "I know how it is. Lots of boys are full of mischief, aren't they?"

Fred said, "I'd been baptized already, and I was carrying that around. Now that may not seem big to you, but think about what you're carrying around right now. Would you like to get rid of it?"

Maybe we're not involved in horrendous evil, but still want our relationship with God to be truer, healthier, and more honest. The good news is we can turn around. Christ is there to help us.

Conclusion

We always need to be turning around, at least a little bit, don't we? Unless we are perfect, we constantly need corrections along the way. Advent is a time for honesty and celebration, a time to take a deeper look at our lives and thank God for forgiveness.

When we honestly look at our lives and ask for God's help, we're getting ready to see Christ in a new way. That's what advent is about - preparing a way for the Lord, lowering the mountains before us, lifting up the valleys, and making a straight highway through the wilderness.

Christ is on the way!

Amen.