

Do Not Presume – But Repent

2 – Re-Establishing Trust

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

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Second Sunday of Advent

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I

I love that little poem by Robert Frost, “Fire and Ice.”

“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Fire and ice and the world’s destruction. Either works quite nicely. Freeze to death. Burn to death. Either way will work. But the very same forces that work for destruction also work for deliverance. Like nuclear power, which can be used to light a city or incinerate a city. The point becomes not the raw power potential of the force, but the purpose behind the user of the force. Fire is a powerful force in both a bad hand and a good hand. Fire can destroy as today wildfires rage across Israel, and fire can purify and refine.

Purifying and refining, strengthening and redeeming, that is what this season is about. The Good News of Jesus Christ comes to tell us that God’s intention is not destruction but deliverance. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”ⁱ

God came once in Bethlehem. God is coming again in final judgment and the completion of all things to set everything right. God is coming even now, injecting himself into the equation of a world hell-bent on destruction, and bringing deliverance. But that deliverance will be demanding and calls for turning around from the way we are drifting to the way God is leading. The Bible calls this Repentance. And the Season of Advent is all about it. Do not presume salvation just oozes into you and you do nothing about it in response. Instead repent!

Advent is an intentional time of spiritual preparation and evaluation. Not simply a little purple of the church color instead of red and green of the culture color so far as

marking the season. Not simply Jesus mixed in with parties and shopping and general frantic preparation. Not simply, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” mixed with “Frosty the Snowman” at the shopping centers. Advent is a call to go counter-culture. “Repentance is a basic reorientation of your life. In repentance we turn from one framework of meaning to another, from one way of thinking about self, others, God and life to another competing and compelling vision.”ⁱⁱⁱ “Repent!” calls a wild wilderness prophet, lifting his voice. Stop dead in your tracks, turn around, and go in a new direction.

Repent, because without this intentional turning we tend to remain oblivious to what God wants to say to us. We tend to go on about our everyday routines, same as always. And yet the fact is, we are all moving, we are all changing. We are all headed somewhere. We are all journeying from one place to another. The world is constantly changing, turning, moving, literally, scientifically, and spiritually, and with it so are we.

If we are not intentional about the change that happens to us we tend to just drift along, eating the junk food, absorbing the empty slogans of the consuming culture that real life is in buying and consuming, mortgaging and charging more and more on the plastic. We are told this is life-giving, when it is in fact death-dealing.

We have lived through a few bitterly hard economic years now when that reality has hit us everywhere when that house of cards has come tumbling down, and we have seen that the way of the world’s buy and charge and don’t think about tomorrow simply won’t hunt any longer. The institutions we assumed would always be there, and be reliable proved otherwise.

II

I saw a survey of Alabamians on trust in institutions last week. It indicated our trust is abysmally low on most of them. Government, Wall Street, Banks, and Business, all got low marks. We do not trust them. The only really high mark for an institution went to the Military, and we can be grateful for a strong patriotic people and dedicated soldiers. But if that is the end of it, that remains pretty empty. Simply having good solid soldiers protecting us is not enough for a solid base in life. What are they protecting us for?

I did not see any statistics in that survey about Religion, but I have seen enough in other surveys, and talked to enough people, and seen enough of scandal across the religious waterfront, to know that Religious Institutions these days are way down low in trust level as well, even while spiritual searching and spiritual yearning are on the rise.

Here is the irony. There is a deep hunger afoot, expressed especially among teens and young adults, for spiritual authenticity, for the reality of God. In fact over the past 30 years, roughly corresponding to when I finished seminary, spiritual searching and a desire for transcendent purpose has been on the rise worldwide. Young people are searching, not for institutional alignment, but for divine alignment - the real thing, God, the Holy One, Emmanuel – God with us. What Advent offers!

Advent invites us onto that search, that journey, that road. Advent invites us to re-establish trust with that One who alone is worthy of our trust. As John Claypool, formerly pastor of St. Lukes here in Birmingham, once observed in lectures at Yale,

“The Christian preacher, then, does have an awesome task to perform. He or she must attempt to do far more than simply move people around at the level of behavior. Our task is to re-establish trust at the deepest level, between the human creature and the ultimate Creator, to participate in the miracle of primal reconciliation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Re-establishing trust at the deepest level, that is our need. Every family, it seems, has its crazy cousin. The weekend before Thanksgiving Gayle and I hosted a reunion for Gayle’s father’s side of the family. Members of the Dunn clan drove in from far reaches of lower Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi, including the crazy cousins. Gayle’s immediate family including her parents, brother, sister, her spouse and some of the children, arrived at our house on Friday afternoon for a quiet moment together. This is the Tennessee part of the family, those we see regularly. You might say, this is the more sedate part of the family. But all said, “OK now, just wait till we get downtown to the hotel where the Mississippi and South Alabama crowd part are arriving. Those are the wild and crazy cousins!”

III

Well John the Baptist is the crazy cousin of Jesus’ family who tells it just like it is. Remember Elizabeth and Mary were cousins, and John first greeted Jesus from inside his mother Elizabeth’s womb when Mary came calling during their shared pregnancies. John takes this search for God to a new level. He’s the one who moved off to the wilderness, traded in his street clothes for sack cloth, let his hair grow out, and ate locusts. Jesus’ cousin John comes in the guise of an Old Testament prophet, the last of them. He has the role of pointing to the new way God is opening in Jesus. John is the last of the old and the front man for the new. And he is pretty good at it.

As our text from Matthew 3 opens, John is holding revival meetings out in the stark Judean wilderness, and let me tell you that is dry barren country. But great crowds make their way out from Jerusalem and the whole area of Judea. Many are coming, eager to hear a Word from God. John’s harsh piercing cry to repent is reaching the hearts of many and they are going down into the waters of the Jordan for baptism, confessing their sins.

Among those who step forward for baptism one day are some of the religious establishment from Jerusalem – Pharisees and Sadducees. These two groups represent both the right wing and the left wing of the religious institutions of Israel. The Pharisees are the no-nonsense serious fundamentalists, scriptural literalists, the purists who are most uncomfortable under the arm of Rome’s occupation. The Sadducees are the compromising cultural elite, sophisticated, accomodationalists, the country club crowd, the business upper-class, eager to go along to get along, knowing that when Rome is happy, everybody is happy, and business is good.

When both Pharisees and Sadducees step up for baptism it strikes John about like when in the old communist Soviet Union in Russia spies would infiltrate Christian worship services and take notes on the preaching, and write down names of who was attending.

These Pharisees and Sadducees coming forward for baptism strikes John about like that. John is suspicious and, none too subtly calls a spade a spade, shouting, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”^{iv} John does not refuse them baptism apparently. We are not told that. But he does make it clear that if they receive it a change is expected. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’”^v “You brood of vipers.” Somehow those verses do not make it on the front of too many Christmas Cards!

John shows us bluntly what this coming Messiah is going to demand of us. Do not pull out your framed degrees or your long family tree. Do not pride yourself on your grandparents’ faith or your parents’ faith. Do not presume – just because you are a 4th or 5th generation Presbyterian, or your father or grandfather was a Presbyterian minister – that you are good to go. “Do not presume to say to yourselves ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’” You were baptized once. Good. But now how are you living it out? You walked the aisle at a revival, or went through a Presbyterian confirmation class once? Good. But where is the fruit? What is being produced from the repentance you once made? How is it working out for you? A few minutes ago, you spoke the words of the Corporate Confession and you continued silently confessing sins you would never dare voice to another person. Good. So now will you go in the new direction God is opening before you? Will you trust the living God who has come to make things right? Will you take the next step?

John comes as the hinge between the old and the new. From his very first verse, Matthew’s Gospel is intent on showing his readers that something radically new and decisively different has now come in Jesus whom he calls “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”^{vi} And ^{vii}John is pointing to him. “Behold the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.”

IV

From our perspective, sitting today in a pew of a Presbyterian Church as those who are by identification part of the New Israel and not the Old Israel, John’s message can feel quite uncomfortable. Because we’ve sort of become part of the old now. We’ve become the establishment who tends to get too comfortable in our surroundings as part of the privileged folk in a privileged Western culture country.

This past week more WikiLeaks of sensitive diplomatic backchannel conversations were being broadcast across the internet, revealing the doublespeak of generals and kings and diplomats, making literally true what Jesus said, “Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.”^{viii} These last few years with the failure of financial institutions and corporations, names like

General Motors, Enron, Bernie Madoff, have become, like 9-11, shorthand for personal and corporate upheaval. The world we had come to trust came apart and we lost our savings and our bearings.

Re-establishing trust at the deepest level Primal Reconciliation is our greatest need. John calls Pharisees and Sadducees, Republicans and Democrats, Over the Mountainers and South Siders and North of I-20 dwellers, any and all, repent! God is coming close, the Kingdom is near in this promised Messiah. Everything you have always counted on is changing. The old has passed away the new has come. What you spend your life building can be gone in a minute. Therefore, renew your trust - embrace the radical vision that God is now in charge and longs for your loyalty and your love. "O Jesus I have promised to serve Thee to the end."

V

Many of you know that every summer I spend a couple of weeks away in prayer and preparation for the coming year's ministry focus, getting a direction in terms of preaching and some of the special projects we may undertake. This time has been a wonderful blessing which you make possible. For this time, I usually get with my minister buddy, Dr. Jack Baca, pastor of the Village Community Presbyterian Church, in Rancho Santa Fe, California. Rancho Santa Fe is, well there is just no other way to say it - it is an exclusive high dollar neighborhood North East of San Diego.

Last August I was in Jack's back yard during this study time. He lives in the church manse, a beautiful Spanish-style home owned by the congregation, because, even with a very nice salary – as clergy salaries go, there is no way he could afford to buy a home in that community. The swimming pool and tennis court of the church-owned manse make the sacrifice of ownership just about worth it!

You may recall that a few years ago terrible wildfires raged through the neighborhoods of San Diego. They encroached upon Jack's church and Jack's home. Homes all around Jack and Helen Baca's went up in smoke. The fires came right up to the edge of the church and almost burned it and Jack and Helen's home as well, but for the fact that Jack had gone back into the area after it had been evacuated by the National Guard because the Church just down from his house opened its doors to house and feed visiting firefighters. Because he got back into the area, he was able to get to his house, and with a garden hose beat back the fires creeping up through his back yard grass.

Standing there in that backyard with Jack, I saw where the previously wooded forest 50 feet behind his house was entirely wiped out. The ax was beyond "lying at the root of the trees; every tree (was) (already) ... cut down and thrown into the fire." What had once been a lush wooded barrier of hardwoods now is an open grassy vista to the freeway 200 feet below and the surrounding hills beyond.

Jack told me that in the days after the fire, they cooked up lots of food, then he and his wife Helen went from house to house nearby, knocking on doors to see if anybody was there, and asking if they needed food or other basic necessities. It was then

that they came upon neighbors standing in the yard nearby of what had been their lovely family home, now with only one wall standing. These neighbors were adult age children and they told Jack and Helen how their mother had died two years ago, and their father just died a few weeks before the fire. After his death, brothers and sisters had been arguing and fighting over the stuff, petty bickering over who gets what. Then came the fires. And it was all burned up.

Their father had been a deeply devout Roman Catholic who had been to visit Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying in Calcutta and had brought back a statue of St. Francis which was in the back yard. The son showed Jack and Helen this slightly singed statue and told them it was the only thing they found left among the charred ruins of their family home that was not destroyed, the only thing that survived. This son laughed, "Dad would have thought this was as it should be. Everything we fought over was burned up. Only this symbol of what outlasts time survived."

"One who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."^{ix}

He is coming. His kingdom is near. Repent and work for those things that last. Be cleansed by his fire, purified, refined, redeemed, delivered; not destroyed.

Amen.

ⁱ John 3:16-17.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Long, Matthew, p.27.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Claypool, The Preaching Event - Lyman Beecher Lectures, Yale Divinity School, p. 26 and 36.

^{iv} Matthew 3:7.

^v Matthew 3:89.

^{vi} Matthew 1:1.

^{vii}

^{viii} Matthew 10:26.

^{ix} Matthew 3:11-12.