

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
 St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
 on Advent 2 (9 December 2007):
 Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

No Shortcuts; Just Love

Advent 2: Today, I find myself at the convergence of some very powerful elements. The first element is that we are thoroughly in the midst of the season of Advent, with its no-nonsense admonitions to wait and watch, to expect and prepare.

Added to this is the second element, emerging, as it always does, on this, the second Sunday of Advent. The season's no-nonsense message becomes embodied in the towering and strange figure of John the Baptist, who I must confess is my biblical hero. John is tough as nails on the outside, brooking no foolishness about what matters. Yet, on the inside, he is as tender-hearted (and sometimes as broken-hearted) as anyone is who dares to speak of and to live with God.

And then, the third factor that defines this occasion stems from the reality that this is the last Sunday sermon I will give as your rector.

As you might imagine, there is so much that I want to say to you, but in the interest of time -- and tears -- perhaps the best thing for me to do is to do what I have done in this pulpit for the last eight-and-a-half years, and that is to preach the gospel the best way I know how and to try and put its promise and presence into your hands.

I will attempt to do this by way of focusing upon the figure of my biblical hero, John the Baptist. I want to take a closer look at his message and what it means for us; and in doing so I will be able to convey some of what it has meant for me to be with you, as your rector.

But (as you will see and hear in short order) this will be hard for me to do. So, I will need to call upon your gracious help and understanding in order for me to get through this.

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

With these stunningly simple words, our gospel for this morning begins. Like the one who wakes stays awake at night to watch for the dawn, John the Baptizer sounds the alarm. Remarkably, people awakened to his call and gathered themselves around him to hear and to learn what life was like at this propitious moment, this moment of God's daybreak.

St. Matthew editorializes so that at the sound of John's voice, we might catch the significance of this human alarm clock. For as we are roused by this wilderness wake-up call, Matthew is eager for us to remember and to apply the ancient prophecy. The evangelist tells us that this wild-

thing, this grasshopper-eating, leather-lunged, back-to-nature man is the one mentioned by Isaiah the prophet, as the one whose voice cries in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

For their part, the people heard the Baptizer’s voice. Strangely, they were drawn to its clarion call to come to the wilderness. Amazingly, they came. They came into that empty, dry, foreboding place -- in themselves -- the one where God is not known as present – they came in order to hear the harbinger of hope proclaim that God was on the move to fill their emptiness.

“Repent” is what they initially heard. “Repent.” Hearing that word is like stepping into the morning shower, still half-asleep, stumbling and fumbling to turn the warm water on and instead getting drenched with a stream of icy-cold water. It is a shock to the system, but you do wake up!

Entering the wilderness is a long and hard way to go just to hear “Repent.” You would think more people would be upset to hear such a thing. You would think that the people would get some bonus points for daring to move beyond their comfort zones and for facing how absent they had made God in their lives. You would think that John the Baptist would at least offer them a word of welcome, or stroke them a bit for being on time, or offer a group hug for reassurance. But no! “Repent” is what met the people. Repent. Prepare. Make straight.

While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called “the Baptizer,” was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here. [Matthew 3:1-2 – The Message]

“Repent.” The way we have learned to hear this word too often makes it sound like a hammer on a nail. We cringe at its utterance. Yet, rather than chasing people away, John’s admonition drew them, as if its sound was that of fresh water in the desert. Why? What do you make of this? How do you understand such a thing?

Have you ever been lost? I mean really lost? Is there anything more debilitating than doing your best at getting where you wanted to go and losing your way? Is there anything more redemptive than finding someone who simply and directly tells you to “turn around” and head in a new and helpful direction?

In 1994, when I was on my first sabbatical and Bev had joined me in Britain, we took a train to Glasgow, Scotland to meet the parents of a parishioner. The intercity train from Durham, England, was a bit late departing; and when we arrived in Glasgow, it suddenly became clear to us that we had to catch the local line at another station in order to meet the parents. Frantically, we rushed from the intercity train station, pulling our luggage behind us, racing in the direction that I had discerned from the map that would lead us to our next train. But we were lost.

Our pace, the fact that were dragging suitcases behind us, and the desperate, sweaty looks on our faces made us stand out like soar thumbs in Glasgow city's pedestrian mall. In what was, in fact, a beautiful city walkway, filled with pedestrians and no cars, it quickly became clear that we were lost with no time to spare.

I stopped, map in hand, and looked around. My anxiety was going through the roof with the thought of missing the train and missing our connection with my parishioner's parents. Then, suddenly from behind, a Scottish man emerged from the crowd and tapped me politely on the shoulder. Without any ceremony, he asked if I needed directions, and quickly proceeded to point out that I was one block from where I needed to be.

I "turned around" and looked to where he pointed and saw the train station sign. Relief instead of sweat poured over me; and as I turned to thank him, the man vanished, like a redeeming angel, into the city crowd.

Repent. Turn around. Face a new way. Instead of it being a threat, my repentance was a relief. For in turning around, in changing my orientation, I saw where I was and where I needed to be, and I was not that far away.

Repent. In Greek, the word is *metanoia*. It means, "turn around," "change your mind," change your orientation; and as the Baptizer indicates, it requires that we prepare ourselves to receive the straight path that lies ahead of us.

So, you see, while John's word of repentance does initially sound cold and shocking and even off-putting to us, yet, like sleepily walking into a cold-water shower, his words are ultimately words of relief because when we turn around, when we change the way we think, when we stop insisting that the world is flat, there is something of great import to see. And it is God, standing there to embrace us [hands and arms outstretched].

This is what God looks like, when we dare "repent," when we dare to "turn around." Sometimes, it takes a repentant shock to realize how to receive the embrace we so desperately need.

Repent. Prepare. Make straight.

It is God's embrace that we all need. It is God's embrace that is sign and seal that we belong, that we are home, no longer lost, but found. The key issue, however, is how – how to receive God's embrace. How do we go about finding such love?

Cesar Millan is known as "the dog whisperer." He has a television show by that name, airing on PBS; and just recently he has published a book on the subject of his celebrity, that is of training "troubled" dogs. I heard him being interviewed on the radio a month or so ago; and as someone who appreciates his approach to and love of dogs -- and people, I was intrigued by what he said in his interview. It was actually quite pastoral – in a John the Baptist sort of way.

Cesar Millan said three things that struck me as particularly germane to

our Advent experience. The first thing he said was that he “rehabilitated dogs and trained people.” The second thing he said was that Americans tend to have pets as emotional compensation (that is, to make them feel better). And the third thing “the dog whisperer” said was that dogs need three things and need them in this order. They need exercise. They need discipline. They need affection.

I think, in a very real sense, people need these same things and in that same order, too. I think that this is one way of perceiving John the Baptist’s message, what lies behind his warnings. My point is that we all want and need to belong. We all want and need love. But too often people get pets or get married or even go to church in order to gain affection, to have a sense of belonging, to be loved; and there is nothing wrong with that at all, except the sense of belonging or being loved cannot be shortcut.

Affection cannot be the first thing. People need exercise. People also need discipline, and then we will be in a position to receive the love and affection we need, that is of God.

Exercise. Discipline. Affection.

I think this is the meaning behind John the Baptist’s message of repentance. It is the answer to how do we find the divine embrace. We are to turn around and realize that the love we seek – from God and from one another – and even from ourselves – can only truly come when we have first exercised.

For folks like us, the fundamental exercise is worship. Our essential, basic exercise is coming together as God’s people to touch and taste and smell and hear and see what life with God is like. The point is that in a relationship, there is no substitute for the exercise of “showing up.” If you do not show up, you rob me of the God you bring. If I do not show up, I rob you of the God I bring.

Repent. Exercise. Show up.

The second part of repentance, of preparing ourselves to receive the love we need and God gives, is discipline. Discipline is also a word that tends to make us cringe, but in fact what the Baptizer’s call is actually about moves toward the essence of a disciplined spirituality.

To me, understanding spirituality is simple. It entails two things. One, spirituality is about remembering God. Two, spirituality is about doing those things that remind you of God. And that is a healthy and simple discipline for any person, certainly any Christian, who seeks to “turn around” so that they can receive God’s embrace.

And then, and only then, with the exercise of showing up and with the discipline of remembering God, we will have the affection we need. We will be in a position to receive love.

Repent. Prepare. Make straight.

Exercise. Discipline. Affection.

Show up. Remember God. Receive and share in the affection of Communion.

There are no shortcuts to this, even though we all try to find ways of avoiding the repentance, the preparation, and the making the way straight. We are all tempted to leap to the affection part, but that never works out.

I believe that shortcutting attempt is what prompted John the Baptist to explode on the Pharisees with such a harsh condemnation. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance...”

Show up. Remember God. Receive and share the affection of Communion.

There are no shortcuts to affection, although we buy pets, or get married or have children, or even claim membership in a church in order to make us feel like we belong, as if we are loved. But taking shortcuts to relationship never works. The shortcuts always blow-up in our faces, often ruining our future willingness to be in relationship.

We first must work at the showing up, at being present, and then at disciplining ourselves to do the showing up in remembrance of God, who is between us all. And then and only then, will we see what we have always wanted to see: namely, the straight way to love, affection, and lasting life; the straight way to belonging and to genuine community.

Now to close. Please know that from the beginning, I have loved you. Even when I have made mistakes among you, I have always done my

best to show up. Even when I have disappointed you, I have always tried my best to place myself under the discipline of remembering God and of sharing with you that sacred space. And, in turn, more often than I expected and even feel that I deserve, you have showed up, too. You also have worked in disciplined ways to help me remember God and to help me discover the God that is between us.

And now, as I approach my leave-taking from you and from this place that has been home and my community, I need you to know that it hurts so much because there have been no shortcuts between us; and I love you for that.

Thanks be to God and to you. Amen.