

There was a little old lady who was very spiritual who would step out on her porch every day, raise her arms to the sky and yell “Praise the Lord.” One day, an atheist bought the house next door, and he became very irritated with the spiritual lady. So after a month or so of her yelling “Praise the Lord” from her porch, he went outside on his porch and yelled back, “There is no Lord!” Yet the little old lady continued. One cold, wintry day, when the little old lady couldn’t get to the store, she went out on her porch, raised her hands up to the sky and said, “Help me Lord, I have no more money, it’s cold, and I have no more food.” The next morning, she went outside, and there were 3 bags of food on the porch, enough to last her a week. “Praise the Lord,” she yelled. The atheist stepped out from the bushes and said, “There is no Lord! Ha-ha-ha! I bought those groceries!” The little old lady raised her arms to the sky and said, “Praise the Lord – you sent me groceries and you made the Devil pay for them!”

First, a look at this gospel. John is called the Baptist – literally ‘the dipper,’ baptism means ‘dipping in a liquid.’ In the Mediterranean world of antiquity, water, fire and wind (or spirit) were all understood as liquids that could be poured upon or into people. This is how we can then understand that weird phrase about Jesus baptizing or dipping with fire – it was thought of as a liquid, and the experience of Pentecost being a baptism by the Spirit/wind. John performed his dipping in the shallow waters of the Jordan, quite likely after the rainy season (late September to late April) when the water would be warmer. No heated baptismal fonts for them! John’s garb – camel’s hair clothing -- was not the fine camel hair coat we think of today – it was rough, cinched with a leather belt. His kinky diet of bugs and honey symbolically link him with Samson, Samuel, and Elijah, who represent the Old Testament tradition of resistance to injustice and the revolutionary model of renewing society.

At a very obvious level, John challenged the elite to reform their lives. Remember this was an honor-shame based culture. The basic claim to honor in a society whose core values were honor and shame was made through birth. A person was born into an honorable status, whatever it may be. So we can appreciate something of the impact of John the Dipper publicly and loudly calling the supposedly ‘honorable’ Pharisees and Sadducees literally illegitimate children of snakes. The actual Greek says ‘snake-bastards’ but you might get upset if I said that so I won’t say it! But the phrase ‘brood of vipers’ directly challenges their claim to honor. And anticipating a counter-argument from the crowd, John went on to challenge the biological basis of honor in general (“Abraham is our father”) and urges a moral basis instead (“bear good fruit”). Not who one *is* but what one *does* is what determines whether or not we are persons of honor. (adapted from Pilch, THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS, Cycle A, p. 4-5) Wise parents still teach their children this – my mother always said never to marry anyone for their money – but for their character. What they DID was more important than what they had, or whether they were born into money. I guess since I never married that means that I never found anyone with money – or character – THAT WOULD BE WILLING TO PUT UP WITH ME!

OK, so where does this leave us? This is all about change, repentance. Those of you who are parents or grandparents probably remember your child’s first words. While the most often and most likely are ‘mama’ and ‘dada,’ there have been some rather unusual ones. Monica Rivera from Woodland Hills, CA, and her husband, kept practicing mama and dada but the first precious word their little boy said was ‘Bob,’ the name of the family’s golden retriever. And Sylvia Perantinides from Campbell, Ohio, admits that she nags her forgetful husband all the time to take the garbage out. However, she and her husband were both surprised when their infant daughter banged her little fist on her high chair and yelled at her father her first words: “Garbage out!”

Which is not far off from how John the Dipper started his preaching. “Get the garbage out!” “REPENT, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” All of his life, John’s parents had told him the miraculous circumstances of his birth --to parents who were far beyond child-bearing age. God had chosen John to be the prophet who announced the arrival of the Messiah. John didn’t have any excuse to be timid or unclear in his preaching. The world needed to know the Messiah was coming. God’s plan for the salvation of the world was kicking into high gear. And people needed to get ready to see the Messiah, to hear Him, to follow Him. Christ is coming! Get the garbage out! David Guzik, in his New Testament commentary, wrote that it is entirely accurate to say that the first word of the gospel is ‘repent.’

REPENT was the first word of John the Baptist’s ministry (Mt 3:1-2). REPENT was the first word of Jesus’ preaching (Mt 4:14; MK 1:14-15). REPENT was the first word the 12 disciples were told to use when they were sent out (MK 6:12). REPENT was the first word in the instructions Jesus gave to His disciples after His resurrection (Lk 24:46-47). REPENT was the first word of exhortation in the first Christian sermon in the ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (2:38), REPENT was the first word in the mouth of the Apostle Paul through his ministry (ACTS 26:19-20). Yet we don’t hear this word in our society anymore. It’s definitely a churchy word – but we don’t even use it very much in church.

It comes from 2 Greek words – *meta*, ‘to change,’ and *noeo*, which means ‘to think, perceive or understand with the mind.’ CHANGE YOUR MIND. Get the garbage out. It’s why confession is such a wonderful gift on our journey with Christ. It helps us to perceive things more with the mind of Christ than the mind of the world.

I read this week about a young woman named Tatiana Goricheva, who was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, and grew up to become a leader of the Communist youth movement. She was raised an atheist, but at the age of 16, she and her best friend heard the story of Christ for the first time. She began to read the Bible, began to understand what sin is, and realized that she had rejected God’s plan for her for all of her life. She felt a huge burden, but wasn’t sure what to do about it. One day, Tatiana walked into an Orthodox church and asked to see a priest. The priest listened to her lengthy confession and offered her prayers and advice. Through the act of confession, she experienced a deep sense of joy and restoration. She wrote about that day: “I had already had a miraculous experience: from the nothingness of an existence bordering on desperation I had come into the Father’s house, into the church, which for me was paradise. I knew that with God anything is possible.” That’s what repentance is about – restoration, renewal, new life.

Third, the fruit of repentance is joy and peace. The message of repentance may sound harsh and undiplomatic. It might sound out of keeping with the soft, warm feelings we associate with Christmas and Baby Jesus. But it’s motivated entirely by love, by a desire to shake us awake and get us to come back to God and to experience His forever abiding love.

Festo Kivengere is a former Bishop of the Anglican Church in Uganda. Festo was raised in a pagan family, but he became a follower of Christ in early adulthood. His ministry was so influential that he is sometimes referred to as ‘the Billy Graham of Africa.’

Before he became a follower of Christ, Festo describes his life as a ‘spinning top.’ He said, “I worked, I played, I worked....I was just running faster and faster, thinking that the faster I ran the more lively life would become. How wrong!”

But He encountered Christ and asked Christ to enlighten him. He writes: “That day God smashed my heart open and introduced me to the living reality of Jesus Christ, who entered in. My top stopped spinning, and He gave me direction that lasts through eternity.”

I love that phrase: “God smashed my heart open” – it sounds like a country western song about someone who has just fallen in love. But that’s what happens when we understand who God is, and how much God loves us. And that’s what repentance does for us – it smashes our heart open, and we fall in love with God – for the first time – or all over again.

My prayer for all of us is that in the midst of all the busy-ness of this Advent-Christmas season, God may get hold of our hearts, smash them open, and fill us with His love and peace. Nothing else will make Christmas come better than that. Amen. (points 2 and 3 adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2019, p. 58-61)