

You, turn.

Matthew 3:1-12, Revelation 3:14-22

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"*

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but 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 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." (Matthew 3:1-12)

*

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." (Revelation 3:1-12)

So, how are you?

I expected that tepid response,
so I came prepared to not only ask the question but to provide your answers:
I'm fine. Getting along. Busy busy.
Doing well. I'm here. Causin' trouble.
Just great. Fair to middlin'. Keeping warm.
Couldn't be better. Can't complain. Still alive.

If there is any other way that you would've answered that question,
speak now or forever hold your peace.
Now that we got that out of the way,
let me ask you a similar question, but in a much, much more specific way.

How's your soul? How's your soul this morning?

Boom. That question drops heavily doesn't it?
When's the last time anyone has asked you *that*?
Has anyone *ever* asked you that?

You know, I'll be honest, that question makes me uncomfortable.
I'm certain that there have been people whose faith story includes a question like that –
and maybe that's true for some of you.
But for me, that question brings to mind memories
of some well-meaning, overbearing, would-be evangelist
cornering me, waiting intently for my response, and then quietly judging my sincerity.
And so, if someone today would come up to me and ask, "How is your soul?",
I'd be implementing step one of my two-step evacuation plan.

So I get it -- it's cringe-worthy as a conversation-starter,
but hang with me here, just this morning.
By asking that question, I'm not asking "If you die tonight, do you know where you're going?"
I'm not asking whether you have said the sinner's prayer,
whether you've been reading your Bible,
whether you've been giving generously, praying regularly, and extending hospitality.

Some of those questions – well, *a few* of them –
might be good for us to ask each other from time to time.
Better yet, a few of those questions might be good for us to *answer* from time to time.

But that's not what I'm asking.
I'm asking, how is your soul?
How would you go about answering *that*?

In our culture, the word "soul" often is used as another way to refer to our emotions or feelings.

Or, maybe, we think of the soul as that formless, mysterious part of ourselves that lives on when we die.

But in both the Old and New Testaments the word for soul never signifies some disembodied part of ourselves. The soul incorporates our bodies, our minds, our personalities, our intellect, our emotions. The totality of our being -- our soul -- has an origin and a purpose. Your soul comes from God and is meant to glorify God in relationship with God and others. Love of God, love of neighbor is not merely the greatest commandment, it is also your purpose.

So how's your soul this morning? Are you living in a way that makes sense of your purpose?

John the Baptist is the Doberman Pinscher of the gospel. That's what Barbara Brown Taylor says, and no matter how hard I try, I could never improve upon that image. Here we are, making our way to Christmas, and the presents need shipping, the lights need stringing, the cookies need baking, the cards need mailing. We are busy getting all these things done on our way to the manger, when, all of a sudden, "this big ol' dog with a spiky collar has got us by the ankle."¹

I mean, imagine the scene. John the Baptist is standing knee deep in the Jordan River, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." At first, a few brave ones come down. They confess their sins and then receive John's baptism as a sign of repentance. And then a few more come. And then a long line forms and now people are singing, "As I went down to the river to pray . . ." (some of this is extra-biblical material), The sun is shining, the water is sparkling, a slow breeze cools the afternoon heat – and then, then, that bug-eating, camel-hair coated prophet, John the Baptist, has to mess it all up.

"You brood of vipers!" he shouts when he sees religious leaders joining this beautiful scene. "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit worthy of repentance. Oh, and don't go saying to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our Father." For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 22.

Well. That's. Not. Nice.

In fact, to civil, sophisticated, enlightened people like us . . . I mean, like those religious leaders, people who have their reputations solid, their theology straight, their ethics down -- people with the all right views on all the right issues -- to those people, John's call to repentance, using those words, is offensive, if not downright rude.

Brood of vipers? Axes and winnowing forks? Unquenchable fire?
Could John be implying that something about *us* needs to change?
We're here, the faithful ones! Setting a good example for the sinners!

John the Baptist is the Doberman Pinscher of the gospel, demanding our attention, scaring off sleepwalkers who have wandered into his presence, and forcing all others to see themselves for who they really are, their weaknesses, their brokenness, their . . . sin.

I don't know about you, but on my way over the river and through the woods to Bethlehem, I'd rather avoid the Doberman sitting outside the stable. Yet Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John -- all four gospels -- make this much clear: You won't get to Jesus without getting through John, for those who know nothing of their sin need nothing of God's grace.

Preparing the way of the Lord, making straight the paths for him, means repenting, turning from the ways of this world and turning towards the way of Jesus, the truth of Jesus, the life of Jesus.

And lest we think that this is a message that the church is to carry to others, like to sinners (you know, people not here), our verses from Revelation make it clear that this message is also for churches, one that proclaim Jesus as Lord with their lips but no longer follow him with their lives. And that's because that they no longer need him. For, yea, though they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, they shall fear no evil, for their wealth and their prosperity, they comfort them.

Repentance is not a once and done, turn or burn decision. Repentance, true repentance, means preparing our souls -- the totality of our beings -- for the way of the Lord, by turning then walking way of the Lord. It means turning, and returning, and returning to Jesus.

How can you tell if you're just going through the motions,
registering your attendance,
like those religious leaders that John the Baptist rebuked,
the ones who loved the idea of change as long as it didn't involve them?

Ultimately, that's something that you need to ask and answer for yourself.
Are you living in a such a way that makes sense of your soul's purpose:
to glorify God --
to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbor as yourself?

How can we, together, tell if we've become like that church in Laodicea,
lukewarm, neither hot nor cold,
so comfortable in our wealth, so secure in our prosperity,
that we really don't need the presence of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish the goals that we've set before us?

That's something that we need to ask and address together.
But, make no mistake, we are like that church in at least in one respect --
we are rich and prosperous, as are most churches in the United States.

I ran across a tweet this week written by Brandi Miller, a writer and campus minister.
She wrote, "The problem with white progressives is that they often love the appearance of diversity
while still being in love with the benefits of power and privilege.
They espouse the "right" values without having to pay the cost of living those values
(or equate being called out as doing so)."²

It turns out this tweet was prompted by the fact
that the next Democrat presidential debate is made up of entirely white candidates.
This, after beginning with the most diverse field in history.

But when I first saw it, I thought it was referring to white progressive churches,
and though I wouldn't use the label "progressive" to refer to myself,
I wondered whether her words applied to me, personally.

After reading that, I was reminded of another quote,
this one by Peruvian Catholic priest and liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez.
"If there is no friendship with [the poor] and no sharing of the life of the poor,
then there is no authentic commitment to liberation, because love exists only among equals."

Both Brandi Miller and Gustavo Gutierrez made me think about my tendency, the church's tendency,
to give Jesus lip service without given him life service.

² Brandi Miller (@BrandiNico), December 3, 2019. <https://twitter.com/BrandiNico/status/1202004666852069377>.

Am I, are we, pulling up for carry-out faith saying,
“Hmmm, I’ll take some good news for the poor, some release for the captives,
some of that freedom for the oppressed, maybe a side order of bread –
oh and some wine, thimble sized -- no make that grape juice –
and you know what? I’m feeling generous, so you can keep my change?”

Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.
I hope my message today is not piling a heaping helping of guilt on top of you
because that’s not what I’m intending.
Repentance is an act of hope, not shame.
It’s something to celebrate, not lament.
It’s a call to freedom not a call to the principal’s office.
Repentance, our repentance, is part of the good news.
How ironic is it that we think it’s something for others --
for hard-headed, close-minded, sinful people?

As many of you know my younger sister Tricia died three years ago.
Tricia had a hard life.
Some of it was due to some of the things that she experienced before she was three years old,
before she was adopted into our family.
Some of it was due to some of the things that she experienced as a youth,
things she didn’t tell anyone until well after she became an adult.
And some of it was due to the choices she made in response to the pain she felt.
Tricia had several addictions, was in and out of jail for drug-related offenses,
and she died after taking heroin laced with fentanyl.

Tricia caused a lot of pain in our family.
Growing up, in response to the pain that I felt,
in response to the pain that I saw in my parents,
I set out to prove that I was not like my sister, that she was not my parent’s fault.
This wasn’t a conscious decision, of course.
It wasn’t until years later, after counseling, spiritual direction, and hard work,
that I became aware of how much my identity was tied up in my relationship with my sister –
my desperate need to achieve, my deep desire for approval, my fierce independence.
And I also became aware of how my responses to the pain I felt must have caused more pain for Tricia.
My brokenness contributed to Tricia’s brokenness, and hers to mine.

Eventually, I felt convicted to ask Tricia for forgiveness.
She was in jail at the time.
By appearances, I was a successful brother – a pastor – generously leaving his loving family
to visit his failure sister – a felon – languishing again behind bars.
But I knew that wasn’t the truth.
I knew that we were both broken.

When I told her why I had come, she forgave me –
immediately, completely, without minimizing my need.
After Tricia died, I wrote an article reflecting on our relationship.³
Some of you have read it, I know.
It was reprinted in The Mennonite several months ago (April, 2019) entitled “Let Me Stand”
I wrote it because I wanted people to know her, to understand her,
not merely for her struggles or for the way she died.
I wrote it because I wanted people to know that Tricia was a beautiful person –
funny, generous and loving.
I wrote it because I wanted people to know that Tricia was a vessel of God’s grace to me.

On an early draft, I had someone suggest a subtitle to my article:
something like, “Let Me Stand: My Sister’s Journey with Addiction.”
And after the article was published, I had a few people tell me not to be too hard on myself
for how I responded growing up.
That I was just a kid, that it was understandable.
They were trying to care for me, I know.

But in both cases, I wanted to scream,
“You’re missing the point!
You’re not seeing the good news!”
It’s so easy to point the finger at people with obvious problems when we think of sin.
But my brokenness was wrapped up with my sister’s,
and our salvation – not mine alone – is wrapped up in Jesus!
I’ve never tried so hard to get people to acknowledge my sin and my need to repent.

I want to be clear – this is my story alone.
I am aware that some of you may have relationships
where it wouldn’t be wise to talk like I did with my sister.

Yet, it’s important for all of us to remember
that repentance is not defeat.
It’s not the end.
It’s part of the good news.
You, turn. You, turn. You, turn, again and again,
because just past that Doberman of the gospel,
just past that angel of Laodicea’s message to a lukewarm church
just after repentance -- is Jesus,
ready to grant you the riches you truly need,
ready to clothe you with white robes to cover your shame.
ready to anoint your eyes so you can see,
ready to transform a lukewarm church into one of Spirit and fire,

³ <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/justice/reconciliation/let-me-stand>

and ready to reveal who you truly are,
a beloved child of God,
a vessel of God's grace.

How's your soul today?

Listen, do you hear?

Jesus is calling out to you. Jesus is calling out to us,

"I am standing at your door, knocking,

If you hear my voice and open the door,

I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

Let anyone with an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

To all who are loved by God and called to be saints,

may grace and peace be yours through God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.