

“A Brain Is A Wonderful Thing to Wash”

I.

*So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

And all God’s people said: Really? *Really?* This is supposed to be good news? A wild man ranting in the wilderness about judgment and wrath and burning with unquenchable fire? If there is some sort of good news somewhere in the middle of all of that stark raving crazy, well...I guess I missed it.

Too bad. We could probably use some good news this morning. Every year I think of this Sunday as the church’s elaborate practical joke: 3<sup>rd</sup> Advent, the Sunday of Joy. Yeah, right. I’ve had a lot of emotions so far this holiday season. I wouldn’t say that joy has often been one of them. I survived the Snowpacalypse of 2009; I’ve eaten *way* too much sugar and I’ve jeopardized my marriage trying to erect a crooked Christmas tree. With 12 more days till Christmas, joy just isn’t where I’m at.

But Luke *says* that there is some good news here. And this morning, I think I may be just desperate enough to believe him. There is a voice crying out in our wilderness. If we really listen, maybe we can find the joy that we’ve been missing. And here’s a hint: I think it may have something to do with brainwashing.

II.

It happens every Advent: the church goes out into the wilderness for awhile, to listen to the preaching of John the Baptist. Last week Luke set the stage, telling us where and when and why this preaching took place: in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century, in the region around the Jordan, to prepare the way for the promise of God.

This morning we get to see John in action. He may not have the best people skills or most refined manner, but give the guy a little credit: He knows how to draw a crowd. Multitudes make their way into the wilderness, to listen and be baptized by the prophet, to hear and to heed what he has to say. And John is so happy to see them that he hurls insults: *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* Probably not what they expected to hear, but John wants the crowd to understand that God does not play favorites.<sup>1</sup> You may be the ancestors of Abraham and Sarah, but God does not care. God can raise up new children from these very stones. No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey: get over yourself.

Harsh words. But they serve a purpose. A new world is coming. People need to get ready, so John calls the crowd to change. He invites them *to bear fruits worthy of repentance* –to live in ways that serve the promise and the purpose of God. Some lives seem barren and fruitless; they only serve themselves. But other lives blossom and flourish and bring forth beautiful things, the first fruits of the coming reign of God. John asks the crowd to consider the kind of life that they have lived.

And the crowd gets it. They want to change. They want to bear this fruit. They just don’t know where to start, so they ask John, “*What then should we do?*”<sup>2</sup> Something spiritual? Something churchy? Should we fast or pray or pick up a Bible? Well...no. Nothing wrong with any of that, of course, but John keeps it practical. If you have two coats, share one. If you have extra food, share that. Instead of hoarding and holding on to

what you have been given, learn to let go. Learn to share your stuff with someone who needs it more than you do. Start practicing now for the future God has promised.<sup>3</sup>

As John goes on, we learn something about the composition of the crowd. I suppose some respectable religious folks came out to be baptized by John –pious old men with long flowing beards, church ladies clutching their enormous purses, people like that. But John’s crowd contains some shadier characters as well. Cautiously, carefully, fearing rejection, some tax collectors and some soldiers come creeping up to John and ask him what *they* should do. Tax collectors and soldiers. Scum of the earth, collaborators with the enemy. These guys make their living working hand-in-glove with the hated Roman Empire, occupying the land and oppressing the people.

Some might doubt their sincerity—but not John. He has been in the business of human transformation long enough to know that you never can write anyone off. You never can tell which life might get grabbed by the grace of God. So John takes them seriously, and tells them what to do. Tax collectors? *Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.* Soldiers? *Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations. Be satisfied with your wages.*

And I imagine that they did –some of them, anyway. In the wilderness, lives begin to blossom. You never know who might be next.

### III.

So why does John seem so strange to us? Why does his preaching make us squirm in our pews? I think it may have something to do with that one weird little word: *repent*. It is not the kind of word you often hear in our kind of church. It conjures up images of revival tents and sweaty preachers, of lunatics shouting from street corners about the imminent end of the world: *Repent!*

But don’t dismiss it too quickly. This weird little word has a lot to offer us. The Greek word—the word we find on the lips of John the Baptist this morning—originally suggested something like “think again” or “change your mind.”<sup>4</sup> When John calls the crowd to repent, he is really asking them to change the way they think, inviting them to acquire a whole new mind.

It brings us right back to the heart of the matter: the coming reign of God, that new and better world where everything we know, and everything we have been taught to value, will, in the apt phrase of my colleague Stephanie Haskins, be turned “rightside up” –a world of sharing instead of greed, peace instead of war, love instead of hate. When the kingdom finally comes, nothing will be the same.

A new world requires new people, but God will not be starting from scratch. God would rather recycle existing materials. God would rather make us new.<sup>5</sup> And God knows we need it –or, at least, I do. I’m not really ready to live in the new world that God has promised. I may *want* to live in, I may *yearn* to someday to see it, but I do not belong there. I have lived my entire life in this world and, while I don’t mean to brag, I’m kind of good at it. I have grown accustomed to this world’s way of doing things. I’ve figured out how to jump through its hoops, learned to play by its rules win fabulous prizes. I fit in here just fine. Maybe you do too. And that means we are not ready for God’s new world. Not yet anyway. We need a new way of thinking. We need to repent.

And “we” means “we,” as in, “all of us.” No one can be excused from the work of getting ready for God’s new world. No one has already arrived. Even the children of

Abraham and Sarah, even the people who show up for church most Sundays, have a long long way to go. But, on the other hand, all of us *can* repent. No one ever falls so far from the grace of God that they cannot turn around and make things right. Everybody has a shot at this. Even the tax collectors and the soldiers. Even you. Even me.

Every single one of us can and must get ready for the new world that God has promised.<sup>6</sup> And the only thing we need is a brand new brain.

#### IV.

One other thing you should probably know about repentance: It is very, very, very hard. Sometimes it seems impossible. Have you ever tried to change your thinking? It's one step forward and two steps back, occasional victories and all-too-frequent setbacks. Thinking is the hardest habit to break.

But that John the Baptist—he's a clever guy. He knows what he is doing. When people come to John and ask what they should do in response to his message, he never actually tells them to *think* differently; he just tells them to *act* differently: Stop extorting money. Sell your extra stuff. Share it with people in need. It's the Gospel according to Nike: Just do it.

Real repentance begins when we do something different. It's a funny thing about human beings, just the way that we are wired, I guess: We can not think ourselves into a new way of acting, but we can act our way into new patterns of thinking and feeling. You want to be more generous? Give away some of money. You want to learn to love your enemies? Smile and wave when people cut you off in traffic. You want to worry less and trust God more? Act like you already do. Move in the right direction, and sooner or later, your brain will catch up.

#### V.

So I guess the cynics are right: religion really is all about brainwashing. We just have our own word for it. But here's the thing: it is hard to get brainwashed by yourself. If it takes a village to raise a child, it probably takes a church to really repent—to get us out of our old mental ruts and into new ways of thinking.

That is what we are here to do: shared repentance. Communal brainwashing -a beautiful thing to behold. When we listen together to the voice of our still-speaking God, and when we start to do the things God asks us to do—love our neighbor, forgive our enemies, share our stuff—when we start to do those things, something extraordinary takes place. Old habits of thinking fall away. New thoughts, new feelings, new ideas and perspectives take hold. We feel a little less at home in the world that we've got; we yearn a little more for the world that we've been promised. And long before we know it, our lives begin to blossom and flourish and bring forth beautiful things.

This Advent, joy is ours for the asking. You already know what to do. Just do it. And let the brainwashing begin.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “Neither the ritual of baptism nor the rights of birth will substitute for repentance and ethical reform.” R. Alan Culpepper. *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX: Luke, John*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p.84.

<sup>2</sup> As David L. Tiede points out, this question—“*What then should we do?*”—is Luke’s masterfully understated way of underscoring the point that “repentance is more than you a change of heart.” To truly respond to John’s message, the crowd has to *do* something. See his notes on Luke in *The Access Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Gail R. O’Day and David Peterson, General Editors. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.88.

<sup>3</sup> A note less about the subject of this sermon and more about the history of interpretation: Calvin spent his entire career arguing with “fanatics” like the Anabaptists who insisted on taking the teaching of Jesus literally, renouncing possessions and violence. In his treatment of this passage—and obviously having the “fanatics” in the back of his mind—Calvin argues that, in this instance, the Bible ought to be read seriously but not literally. Calvin identifies the commandment to not have more than one cloak as a synecdoche (“for under one example it comprehends a general rule”) and says of those who would take it literally: “Those who lay it down as a law, that no man must have any property of his own, not only make consciences to tremble, but overwhelm them with despair. With fanatics of this sort, who obstinately adhere to the literal meaning, it is not necessary that we should spend much time in refutation.” Just goes to demonstrate that, for the founding figures of the Reformation, the literal sense of the text was not always seen as the right one. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*. Volume I. Translated by The Rev. William Pringle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), pp. 193-194.

<sup>4</sup> *Metanoia* is a compound made up of two terms: *meta*, meaning “after” and *noia*, from *nous*, meaning “mind.” The word originally meant any kind of rethinking and only gradually acquired ethical/religious significance. See the entry on *metanoia* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume IV. Gerhard Kittel, Editor. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp.975-1009.

<sup>5</sup> Barth’s discussion of this passage, and the themes of repentance and conversion, is characteristically rich. A sample: “If there is to be readiness for this new thing, if justice is to be done to it, a new man is needed, a man who is radically changed in mind and thought and aspiration and will, a man who is adequate for this new thing and open to it.” Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics*. IV, 4. Translated by G.W. Bromiley. Edited by T.F. Torrance. (T&T Clark, 2009), p.57.

<sup>6</sup> “Repentance, in other words, is setting right what is wrong and is the appropriate preparation for Christ’s coming.” Paul Scott Wilson. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts*. The Third Readings: The Gospels. Roger E. Van Harn, Editor. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p.313.