

ADVENT 3

The Divine Opportunity (Luke 3:7-18)

Opportunity comes with so many different faces that we often don't recognize it. That's probably why we sometimes miss its call. The divine opportunity often comes in the most unlikely and unexpected way. It's no wonder we don't recognize it, or that recognizing it, we resist it.

Our Advent season is an appropriate time to experience the divine opportunity. Any time is God's season; but often we find certain settings and events more open to religious experiences, especially the seasons of Advent and Lent.

The first Advent preacher, John the Baptizer, offered opportunity in a compelling, almost ferocious way. When we read his words, we don't immediately see that he's actually offering opportunity. New Testament Scholar William Barclay says that John's message "was not good news; it was news of terror." That's understandable. But, sometimes, good news must come dressed in rather rough attire.

That was the nature of John's approach. When we read the brief gospel summaries of his messages, we wonder why people would go to so much trouble to hear him. Were they masochists courting abuse, or perhaps they hoped to hear him thunder against the sins of their neighbours? Whatever the reason, the crowds flocked to hear him. In the integrity of his message, they probably discovered that opportunity which they had been seeking. His was a message of judgment; but in that judgment was also an opportunity. And that opportunity was wrapped up in that great word - repent.

John's message was in fact a message of hope. "Repent," he thundered, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." With that word - repent, John was telling the people that they need not remain as they were. We are not held captive to our failures, our past, or our inadequacy. We can repent. We can get rid of the past. We can start all over again.

We probably wouldn't be terribly happy living in a world where there was no chance to repent. In some ways, we could define hell as a place where there is no possibility of repentance. That's what makes it hell: there's no way out, no chance to get rid of the broken bits and pieces of life, no chance to start again.

Repent is one of the most beautiful words in our language. It pays us human beings a sublime compliment, because it says that we can do something about the direction we have taken. If we were simply poor animals, we'd have no choice but to follow our instincts. But, as human beings, created in God's image, we can repent. If we are on the wrong track, we can turn around, or get on another train. We may not be able to change what we've already done; and we may not be able to fully escape the consequences of those past choices. But we need not continue in the same destructive path. We can repent. We can start all over again.

Every life accumulates a certain amount of regrets – baggage – things we wish we had done differently. No matter how earnestly and thoughtfully we live, we make mistakes – we sin. In time, our sins, stupidities, and poor choices can become like a mountain, as we spend

endless waking hours in the miserable state of regret.

But, thank God, there is something better than haunting regret. Regret, leads nowhere. It is a sea of misery in which we can wallow and fret until it destroys us. But repentance is a gift from God - a wholesome way to look the past in the eye, confess it for what it is, and leave it behind, as we move on to a new start.

Perhaps that's why people were drawn to John the Baptizer. They felt hope when they heard him preach. He spoke harsh, piercing words, but at the same time, he led them to a door of hope. "You can repent," he said. "There is a way out of the dilemma you're in."

But the Baptizer didn't make things easy. As people began flocking his way, he realized that, for some, it was easy religion. Even the most vital religious movements can become "popular" in a way that undercuts their integrity. "You brood of snakes!" he called. "Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?"

It was a figure of speech appropriate to the setting where John preached. The brushwood and stubble which covered that rugged area would sometimes set afire and the flames would leap quickly through the dry nettles. When this happened, vipers and snakes would scurry wildly from their hiding places to escape the flames. John's figure of speech wasn't very complimentary, but it was true to his sense of urgency.

John presented his message in a take-it-or-leave-it fashion. In a way he was like a salesman who bargains faithfully for a time, then says, "This is my last offer," as he turns and walks away. And, that was John's style. "I have something great to offer," he seemed to say, "and you'd better grasp the opportunity now that it has come to you."

Sometimes our hunger for repentance fails to achieve its goal. We need to do more than simply say, "I'm sorry." Repentance needs some means of action. So, how do we obtain repentance?

John the Baptizer got down to specifics. When the people asked, "What shall we do?" John answered with line-on-line counsel. "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry." When tax collectors asked what course they should follow, John answered, "Collect no more taxes than the government requires." The secret of wealth for those first century tax collectors was in cheating; and John quickly set them right. To the soldiers, John gave a two-pronged answer: "Don't extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay."

The most notable thing about John's advice is that it was so practical. He didn't indulge in cliches, like "Pray about it," or "Seek the will of God," or "Work for a just society." He spoke directly to the world in which his people lived, in terms they could put to work that very day.

John wanted the people to live out their new faith in their present occupations and circumstances. Sometimes religion has encouraged people to show their faith by isolating themselves from the world they are part of. In that same situation, we might have counselled the tax collectors and soldiers to resign their positions and find some other kind of work. Both occupations had so many questionable factors that such advice would have made much better sense. You can hear someone saying, "Tax collecting and army life aren't where godly people should make their living."

John offered no such counsel. Perhaps he knew that these people couldn't possibly leave the work they were doing. So, he told them to live out their faith where they were, by being honourable and godly in their current occupations. He didn't tell them it was going to be easy, but that it was the right thing to do.

It's interesting to note that John focussed on the daily work of his listeners. Often, we protest, "We are more than our jobs." Some people don't like to be introduced by references to their employment. However, our daily work plays a large part in defining who we are. When we insist that every person's employment is his or her vocation, a call from God in which we live out our priesthood. Our daily work has significance to us and our society, so to minimize it is to minimize who we are.

How would we translate John's message in our day? What do we say to a world where people work with computers; sell insurance, securities, real estate; or teach, nurse, raise families, practice law or medicine? What is the gospel for a truck driver or a farmer? There had better be a gospel for us in our work place, or our gospel is too small. It may be a good thing to write a letter to our member of parliament; but it is a better thing to honour Christ in the day-by-day marketplace of our jobs. Here, especially, we are called to live out the Gospel. Such was John's message to his generation and it would be his message to us today.

But John was able to offer more than repentance. The people sensed that there must be more to what John was preaching. Was he, they asked, the Messiah? Was he the Christ of whom the prophets had spoken?

John's answer was in the best Advent tradition: Christ is coming, he said, and he brings with him glory and power such as my ministry cannot even suggest. "I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

John gladly announced that his baptism could not even be compared with the baptism which Jesus would bring. His was a baptism with water, to symbolize a washing of life. But Jesus, he said, would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Fire is itself a symbol of cleansing – an interior cleansing quite beyond the reach of water. Metals are put in fire to burn away their inner impurities. John seems to suggest that his baptismal cleansing is almost superficial compared with what Jesus would do.

But John makes it clear that it comes with a price. Our Lord is coming with a winnowing fork, to separate the wheat from the chaff; and he will burn the chaff "with unquenchable fire." We may be inclined to discount John's vigorous language on the grounds that he was such a dramatically emphatic man, that he would even speak of Jesus in terrifying terms.

But, we need to recall that Jesus often spoke of himself in the language of judgment. Quite often, we are so taken with the image of Jesus' compassion (which is a major element in his person and ministry) that we forget the anger he showed to hypocrites and to unworthy religious leaders, and the fearful language he used in describing the day of judgment.

We need not hide from this quality in Jesus. Instead, we should seek to understand it and respond to him. If the One who has come as the ultimate expression of God's love is also

an agent of judgment, then the judgment itself must be an act of mercy. Luke surely saw it as such, for he says that it was with such exhortations that John "preached good news to the people."

This brings us back to our theme of the day. Repentance - is the grandest expression of opportunity, because it is the door by which our Lord comes into our lives; and with him, all the favours of mercy and grace. As we repent, we sweep out the accumulated, burdensome regrets of our lives and clear the way for God's love to fill us.

And as we look at the neglected places in our own hearts, and at the people of the church - we realize that we Christians have forgotten how to repent. We act as if repentance were something only the ungodly should do. In truth, repentance should begin at the house of God. Repentance is a particular gift to us believers; we know by experience the benefits it brings. Therefore, we ought to be all the more ready to put this good gift to use.

Right now we are in the best season for repenting. How better can we prepare for the celebration of Jesus' coming than by clearing away the trivia and troubles of past days, to make clear a highway for our God?

This is our season of opportunity. We can repent at any and every hour, but here we are at the best of all hours. Now is the time, here is the place, where opportunity knocks. Repent, the voice invites us, and begin afresh and anew. Thanks be to God for such an opportunity. Amen!