

“Turn Back to God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent II – December 8, 2019

Matthew 3: 1-12

Ok, I’m going to take a straw poll here. Raise your hand if you love autumn, with its cooler temperatures, changing colors of leaves, and the beauty you see around you. Ok, that’s a good number of you.

Now, raise your hand if you hate autumn, with its cooler temperatures, falling leaves, and the realization that winter is coming. Yeah, that’s what I figured.

The truth is I would raise my hand to both of those questions. I indeed love the cooler temperatures and the vibrant colors that we see throughout October and November, especially when those yellows and reds and oranges are set against a bright blue sky. I’ve always been partial to winter and the beauty it brings when there is fresh snow on the ground.

But my patience also wears thin with autumn, because of those falling leaves. If you’re new to John Knox, you will not have heard me lament about my yard at this time of the year. Our house has approximately ten huge oak trees on it, and every fall I spend any available time I have blowing, raking, and bagging leaves. I finally finished with that arduous task this week. Would anyone like to take a guess as to how many bags of leaves I put out for collection? (ask for guesses) The final total was 123 bags – and those were mulched. Needless to say, I have been sleeping very well over the last four weeks!

This process of cleaning the yard in the fall is at one moment tiresome and then, in another moment, rewarding. It’s tiring to see the yard covered over with leaves after I spent the previous day cleaning everything up. But it’s rewarding to see the trees slowly emptying themselves of their leaves, and to know that soon – hopefully – there won’t be anything else left to clutter the ground. And for me, at least, I need projects like that to help me have a sense of accomplishment: it’s personally rewarding to see a completed end result.

And as I spent hour upon hour cleaning up our yard, I couldn’t help but think of how that process paralleled life. Our lives get messy, cluttered, covered-up with things that prevent our true selves from being seen. It could be unhealthy habits or practices. It might be troubling relationships we find ourselves in. It might be misaligned priorities. Whatever it is, our true selves can’t be seen until we take steps to clean out the clutter. It’s something that we are constantly doing, through all the seasons of our lives. But it’s what we are called to constantly do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It's certainly what John the Baptist calls us to do on this Second Sunday of Advent. John always shows up around this time in our preparations for Jesus' birth. He looks and smells funny, wearing a coat made out of camel's hair and eating wild honey and locusts (Matthew 3:4). And his message of repentance and judgment toward the Jewish leaders feels quite counter-cultural to our modern-day desire to seek joy and happiness in this holiday season. But, just as the leaves need cleaning up every fall, we too need to hear John's message every Advent calling us to realign ourselves with God's purposes. For without that message, we may never truly grasp the depth of why God sent his Son into this world on our behalf.

There are a multitude of images that are present in this morning's passage. We hear of "the ax lying at the root of the trees," and of a winnowing fork being used to clear out the chaff from the wheat (3:10,12). Just like leaves that must be cleared from a yard, these tools are used to remove the clutter or unyielding plants, so that new growth might occur. And this clutter won't just be put in bags by the street for the trash collectors to take: for every tree that doesn't bear fruit and all the chaff that is left "will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:12).

Another image that is prominent in this passage is that of wilderness. From the beginning we hear that John is preaching his message of repentance "in the wilderness of Judea," while other translations describe the setting as a desert (New International Version, 3:1). This image of the wilderness recalls Israel's past, when the people escaped slavery in Egypt but spent forty years in the Sinai desert, and when Israel was taken away into exile in Babylon. In those times of wilderness wanderings, God spoke to his people through Moses, Aaron, and the prophets, calling on the people to prepare for God's coming reign. John's message in the wilderness mirrors the Old Testament prophets: "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"'" (3:3).

And his message is to those Pharisees and Sadducees who had wandered out of the city to the banks of the Jordan. These were the religious leaders of the Jewish people, and John's message probably didn't sit well in their ears. As one commentator says: *John is calling on the religious and political elite from Judea and Jerusalem to repent. The Greek word "metanoia" literally means taking on a new mind-set. It has the connotation of making an about-turn and changing course. John is suggesting that participation in the new kingdom requires a new worldview. It also requires them to turn their backs on everything in which they have been participating and from which they have been benefiting* (Raj Nadella, Connections Commentary, Year A, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2019: 29).

This metanoia – taking on a new mind-set – is at the root of what it means to repent. Repentance literally means to turn around and turn back to the path you should be following. John is calling on the religious leaders of his time to turn back to the true meaning of the Jewish law, so they might be prepared for God’s Son and his kingdom. Repentance is not rooted in our guilty feelings; it is grounded in our belief that God will transform us and others in the image of Christ.

Now, I need to confess something. It is true that I have been motivated these last several weeks to clean up my yard because I wanted to see it decluttered and have it done before winter arrives. But there has also been a small yet real voice inside my head saying, “Maybe if I get my yard all cleaned up it will guilt my neighbors into getting their leaves picked up.” I even had one neighbor jokingly say, “Frank, you’re making us all look bad!” Under my breath I said, “Yes, yes I am. What are you going to do about it?!”

Not surprisingly, my constant yard work did not magically turn all my neighbors down a new path to follow my lead. Some have kept up with it, while others – hopefully – will get that work done this week. But it’s my reminder that people can’t be forced to change themselves; that motivation can only come from themselves, to turn back to whatever path they must follow.

John Burgess describes it like this: *What John – and Advent – reminds us is that repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God’s desire to realign us to accord with Christ’s life . . . For Matthew, John’s strange clothes and harsh sayings are necessary aspects of communicating the full meaning of the gospel. While warm and fuzzy feelings at Christmastime are not all wrong, they fail to capture the full picture of what God has done for us in becoming human flesh* (John Burgess, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 46).

There’s another image in this passage that reminds us we have already been transformed in Christ’s image, and that is the image of baptism. John reminds us that this one whom God is sending will baptize God’s people with the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized, we are dead to our old way of thinking, and alive to the new life God has promised in Emmanuel, God with us. If you have been claimed by the waters of baptism, then God calls you to be accountable in how you live in response to this incredible gift of love.

John says: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (3:8). That phrase does not just mean do good works or be morally upright. That command implies that the fruit we bear reflects our acknowledgement that we have turned back to God, that we have allowed God to transform us in the image of Christ, and that we will be guided by our repentance to shine God’s light in this world.

How are you called to bear fruit worthy of repentance? Is it acknowledging that your priorities have been out of whack, that the choices you have made do not build you or others up in healthy ways? In recognizing that, do you make specific changes in how you spend your time or resources, and in so doing you show others what it means for you to turn back to God?

Or is it realizing that you haven't been real about your faith – with others, with God, with yourself? In realizing that, do you delve deeper into Scripture, or make stronger commitments to church, or consider how your actions outside of Sunday morning witness to others the faith you profess in God's Son, Jesus Christ? In doing so, do you show others what it means for you to turn back to God?

As a community of believers, how are we called to turn back to God and bear fruit worthy of repentance? In our worship, study, and service, are our priorities centered on God or ourselves? Are we seeking to maintain our own comfort and self-worth in our activities and choices we make, or are we motivated to welcome the least of those in our midst, even if that's outside our comfort zone? How are we called to bear fruits worthy of repentance as a community of faith at John Knox Presbyterian Church?

As we continue our Advent journey, the Baptist is calling out from the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." In our individual lives and in our life as the church, may we seek to constantly realign ourselves with God's purpose for us, turning back to God, so we might bear fruit that is truly worthy of repentance.

Thanks be to God. Amen.