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“What will you bring to the manger?: Repentance” GPPC 12-4-16  
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Matthew 3:1-12

Dr. Bob Welch had been part of the music faculty and director of bands at Western Carolina University for a number of years. But by some stroke of luck or providence, he came to my little South Carolina alma mater, Limestone College, in 1978 and became chairman of the music department. I was a freshman music education major, and had spent a good bit of my junior high and senior high school years around various band and orchestra directors with all their virtues, quirks, and flaws.

As you may know, directing a band or orchestra or a church choir for that matter, is not for the faint of heart. And it's not a democracy. I suppose music directors still routinely refer to themselves as “benevolent dictators.” Well, some are more benevolent than others. Ours are really benevolent!

Let me describe Dr. Welch for you. He was a superb musician, a strong trumpeter, and a conductor not only of instrumental groups at

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Limestone but also the Asheville Symphony. He was extremely intelligent, well-read, articulate, and charming.

But when Dr. Welch stepped onto the conductor's podium, there was a transformation. He did not merely expect, he *demand*ed excellence that comes from preparation, concentration, and attention to detail. Show up a couple of minutes late for rehearsal. His dark eyes would twinkle with a touch of menace and he would try to embarrass you. When the band was sloppy, he would scream curses and obscenities, sometimes turning backwards to yell with a hand over his mouth, other times just yelling at the group straight-on. As I recall, on one occasion, he got so angry he threw a chair. On another, he grabbed a music stand and flung it into the orchestra pit behind him. Fortunately, nobody was sitting there. As a gift, one time some students purchased a t-shirt that they presented to him. On the front it read, SOB. And on the back, it read, Sweet Ole Bob. He wore that shirt with pride.

We cannot recommend all his methods, especially for use in the church, can we? But his students had and still have great admiration for Dr. Welch. Why? Because he expected more from us than we wanted to

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give. He required more from us than we thought we could deliver. And that's how we grew as musicians and as people.

Have you had someone like Dr. Welch in your life?

Every year, on the second Sunday in Advent, the lectionary suggests we encounter yet again the disquieting person of John the Baptist. Maybe we're ready to move directly to joyous Christmas hymns, gift-wrapped presents under the tree, a gallon of eggnog, and the wonder of the holy baby's birth. But the fierce John the Baptist stands in our way, shouting, demanding, expecting. To get to Christmas, we have to get past John first.

With his camel's hair clothing coupled with a diet of locusts and wild honey, Matthew wants us to see that John is an Old Testament prophet who has snuck into the New Testament. John is a prophet who bridges the gap to the New Testament and points beyond himself to someone else. Matthew says John goes into the wilderness near Judea and launches into some serious preaching. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

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Now when we hear the word “repent” or “repentance,” what comes to mind? Do we imagine feeling a deep sadness for some moral failure, some sin we’ve committed? Is that what we imagine?

Repentance is actually something more profound and rich than that. It means to change one’s mind, to turn around, to turn back to God. And yes, we often feel some remorse in that process, but repentance doesn’t stop there. As one professor puts it, “[Repentance] means coming to the recognition that one has been basing one’s life on a lie, on a flawed view of what is true and of lasting value...People do not simply turn away from one way of life; they do so when they turn toward something deeper and truer...it occurs when people realize that the world has changed around them.” (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, 27-28.)

We’re able to repent, to turn away from sin and turn back to God, when we recognize the possibility of a life that’s richer and more authentic than what we’ve been living. We make real changes in our lives because we’re captured by a vision greater than the stunted and twisted vision we settled for in the past.

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Some of us have been studying Jim Wallis' fine book on racism called *America's Original Sin*. As he identifies so well, racism is not merely ignorance and bad manners, it is a sin, a destructive way that we view and treat others, consciously or unconsciously. This sin doesn't just infect individuals; it affects institutions, faith communities, and countries. And racism is physically, emotionally, and spiritually deadly. So how do people change? Well, they have to see there is a problem; that's essential. But yelling at people and trying to make them feel guilty doesn't usually work. So isn't it true that what really helps us to change is that we're seized by how wonderful life is when we all value each other as equals? When we begin to grasp the joy of a new life together in beloved community, then we begin to change.

John the Baptist goes into the wilderness of Judea and preaches about a new way of life that's coming in Jesus Christ. He says, "The reign of God has come near. So repent. Turn away from your sin and turn back to God." And the people respond by confessing their sins and being baptized, dedicating themselves to God. An inspiring sight.

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Inspiring, but not for everybody. John sees many Pharisees and Sadducees, people we might assume are already faithful, the religious aristocracy of the time. John sees them coming and he's furious. He yells, "You bunch of baby snakes!" (John is a really good and creative cusser.) "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

And maybe they want to say, "Who warned us? Um, you did, John." But the question is rhetorical, not literal. John is just plain angry at the Pharisees and Sadducees. But angry about what?

He's angry about their evasions of repentance and thus their avoidance of a better, more faithful life. John says, "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" In other words, he sees these Pharisees and Sadducees appealing to their family connections and their past rather than grasping hold of a healthy, daily, living, growing relationship with God.

"Well, you see, I used to worship God in church and engage in Christian education when I was a kid. Now I do other things." "My parents and grandparents were active in this church, but I'm not." "At

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one time, I set aside daily time for personal prayer, Bible study, and reflection.” “I used to care what happened to the poor and weak, but then I became cynical.” And John says, “Do not presume to say to yourselves...”

John sees people relying on their past, depending on family heritage as a sad substitute for a real, daily, struggling, growing relationship with the God we know in Jesus Christ.

So he is a Bob Welch kind of mad, because he sees people missing out. God’s loving reign is near, but these folks are not participating in what God is doing. They’re not bearing fruit. They’re not preparing for Christ to come. They’re failing to do something great with their lives, because of their evasions. So John is angry.

But oddly enough John’s anger is good news.

Imagine you go to a medical doctor for your yearly physical examination. And she has the nurse take your blood, weigh you, check your blood pressure—all that fun stuff. You put on one of those stylish hospital gowns with the opening in the back. Then the doctor comes in, looks you over, and talks with you. Unfortunately, you are overweight

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and have high blood pressure, and you know what's coming next, right?

But pretend that your doctor is terrible. What does a terrible doctor say to you? She says nothing. She doesn't care. Besides, she doesn't want to hurt your feelings or have you get upset with her or be accused of being judgmental. But by keeping her mouth shut, she is committing a kind of malpractice, isn't she?

But what does a good doctor say? She says, "Your lifestyle is hurting you. You need to change your diet, lose weight, and exercise more." Now at this point you can say, "Well, who are you to tell me anything? Just look at you--you're not perfect yourself, doc. You're being judgmental." But you probably don't say that, because your doctor is not being judgmental, is she? She's not judging who you are as a person. Only God can judge the totality of a person. Instead, your doctor is pointing you toward a healthier life, even though that healthier life requires painful changes from you.

Sometimes in the church we remind each other of the promises we've made in our baptism or confirmation or ordination. And because God calls each of us to change, we also encourage each other to make

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changes in order to be more faithful to God and this community. But we never say, “I’m a good person, and you’re a bad person.” Of course not. But the church is a faith community shaped by loving accountability. We’re a family of faith in which every person is cherished. And because each of us is cherished, we comfort each other in sorrow, visit each other in sickness and loneliness, laugh and cry and work together, and sometimes gently call each other to loving accountability. Like a doctor, we’re not judging anybody; only God is able to judge the totality of human beings. We’re simply nudging each other toward what we hope are better lives.

John gets angry, yells, and threatens. But that’s not our way. Yet John’s anger is good news, because he’s warning of changes that need to be made in order to avoid wasting our lives. As he says, “If you spend your time focusing on your heritage or your past faithfulness, then you waste the opportunity to live a faithful life. It’s like cutting down a fruitless tree and chucking it into the fire. It’s a waste.” One scholar puts it this way, “To proclaim repentance is to say that change is possible. A life headed off the road need not end at the bottom of the cliff. A life at

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the bottom of the cliff need not remain there.” (Chandler Brown Stokes in *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol. 1, 35.*)

So John says our choices matter, because *we* matter and our lives matter. And living faithfully and obediently is not something we should put off. Time is short and our choices are urgent.

But here’s the good news. John says there’s someone who is coming after him so great he’s not even worthy to carry his dirty sandals. John says, “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.”

The good news is that Christ has come baptizing, drenching us in God’s loving Spirit, and empowering us to be a repentant people. With the fire and passion of the Spirit, God enables us to be more faithful. And with God’s grace in Christ, God forgives us when fail, and picks up to try to be faithful again.

So let’s take stock of our lives today. What sins do we need to ask God to help us repent of? Have we gotten lazy with our prayer, worship,

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and study? Are we overly critical people? Are we grouches? Are we involved in damaging relationships? Do we need to find a 12-step group and counseling to face our addictions? Are we doing something unethical? Are we living in fear, instead of trust? What attitudes do we hold, what things are we saying and doing that are destructive to other people and to us? And what greater life beckons to us as we prepare for Christ's coming? What is God offering us in repentance, if we will simply reach out and take it with both hands?

The manger lies before us. Let us bring something. Let us bring our repentance. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal