

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent Communion Service, March 1, 2009  
Lessons: Genesis 15:1-6 and Mark 1:4-5,14-15

## BECAUSE I HOPE

Both John the Baptist and Jesus call upon people *to repent*, and so we might expect their messages to be much the same. They are not. The gospels tell us Jesus disappoints John the Baptist, who comes to represent the old way as a model of righteousness that is not open to the kingdom of God Jesus represents to us.

The biblical word for *repent* means to *turn* and face in a different direction, then go in that new direction. But do I repent to turn away from something bad or toward something good? Physically, that may sound like a distinction without a difference, but I think the conflict between Jesus' message and John's is exposed by this distinction between turning *away from* something or turning *toward* something.

Why do I turn? What makes me do it? If I turn primarily to get away from something and leave it behind me, I might be afraid of it, disgusted by it, sick and tired of it, bored with it, or just done with it and ready to give my attention to something else. But the purpose of my turning to get away. In that case, what I am turning toward matters less than what I am turning away from, which leaves what lies behind me in control. This is the model for the preaching of John the Baptist. God's judgment is coming and coming soon. Look at the evils you have been doing, think of God's judgment, and be afraid. Be ashamed. Feel guilty. Feel disgusted with yourself and your way of life. "Even now," John says in the gospels, "the axe is laid to the root of the trees." Repent, before you get caught in the crash.

This John-the-Baptist approach to repentance should be starting to sound familiar to people acquainted with the type of Christianity dominated by the negatives: fear, shame, guilt, and disgust. The believers respond as prescribed because they have been warned, frightened, or made to feel ashamed, guilty, and disgusted with themselves. Having turned away from all of that (or just suppressed their desires), they remain focused on the negatives and so are tempted to refocus their disgust upon their neighbors.

And what is the new? In this negative model, it is merely the non-old, a negative definition of faithfulness to Christ. *Well, I don't do those things.* And, what do I do? *I keep away from those sins and live a good, clean life.* May God deliver us from the judgments of people living good, clean lives. They formed the opposition to Jesus. Of course, it is

possible to get one's life cleaned up and yet become compassionate rather than judgmental, but that kind of a turn from the old to the new requires more than fear, guilt, shame, and disgust. It needs to be turned toward something positive, which is the love and mercy of God.

Jesus also calls people *to repent*, to turn, but he emphasizes what is coming, what is new, what is liberating and life-giving. He tells people what to turn *toward*. The kingdom of God is coming and is already at hand for those who can see it. His is good news, gospel, not mere warning, but promise. In the Bible, change starts with promise, not mandate. Abraham is the model. God makes Abraham an impossible promise, the son he and Sarah could not have and are now too old to have. When Abraham doubts, God offers no proof that the promise will be kept, no explanation of how it is possible, but just a reaffirmation of the promise now made even larger – not just a son but countless descendants through that son. Look up at the night sky and count the stars, if you can. “So shall your descendants be.” There's no proof or even rationale in that response to Abraham's doubt, and so it all comes down to this: *Trust me because I am your God, and I will be faithful to you*. Abraham does put his trust in God, and that is faith, the true kind of righteousness to which we are called.

Jesus' phrase “kingdom of God” requires some explanation because it has been corrupted by Christendom into the reign of the princes of the church, which was brutal and bloody. We can see the nature of God's kingdom from the way Jesus treats people. It is the realm of grace, mercy, and healing. It is the rule of trust in the God who loves us. Ultimately, it is a world in which nothing within us or outside us hates any longer or mounts opposition to God's love for all. When from prison John the Baptist sends his disciples to convey to Jesus John's disappointment in him – *where's the fire?* – Jesus sends them back to tell John people are being healed and given new life filled with hope and promise. And he adds, “Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”

There's the difference. Acceptance by God calls people away from self-disgust and self-rejection. God's promise of new life that counts for something worthwhile replaces self-defeat and despair with new hope and purpose for living. “Stop doing that” becomes, instead, *Walk with me and learn the wonder of God's redemptive love*. “You're worthless” is overruled by Jesus' declaration, *You mean everything to me because God loves you and calls you to life*.

Logic still applies. If I turn to something new and promising, am I not thereby turning away from the old and worthless? And, of course, it's not so easy as it sounds in the model because the old still has its hooks in me. But I'm moving away from it, and even more importantly, I think, the old is no longer defining me and my life. The old is not calling the shots, not even in the negative way of *don't*, *won't*, and *must not*. Be careful here, because

I still must not turn back to what lies behind me, but now I am motivated by hope and trust, not merely by fear and disgust.

Look at the difference in attitude toward self. Am I a failure trying to stop failing because I am guilt-ridden, ashamed, and frightened? Or am I a person valued by God being led and guided into a better life with a more promising future?

Judgmental Christianity says, "If you stop doing that, we'll accept you." Jesus says, *Turn to God, because God has come close to embrace you and give you life.* Trying to inspire change solely or primarily through the negatives fails to change the human mind and heart and often succeeds only in closing the mind and hardening the heart.

I think it comes down to this: *Is God against us or for us?* Jesus came as the living answer that God is for us – not benignly or tolerantly, not to excuse or merely console, but to turn us toward life, healing, and wholeness and teach us to be stewards of God's grace. When God comes, promise comes and gives us hope. The new replaces the old. We are not judged and left empty. We repent, we turn, in hope because even suffering, shame, and death could not turn God's Son away from us. Amen.