

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

December 4, 2016

“Turn”

Advent 2016, part 2

Matthew 3:1-12

This morning I want to start with a classic game, “Name That Tune.” There are a lot of songs out with the word “Turn” in them, so I’m going to give you a few lyrics, and you can finish them for me. Ready?

- “...every now and then I get a little bit lonely and you're never coming round...” (Turn Around by Bonnie Tyler)
- “Here I am on the road again, There I am up on the stage, Here I go playin' star again, there I go...” (Turn The Page by Bob Seger)
- “To everything...There is a season...And a time to every purpose, under heaven.” (Turn Turn Turn by the Byrds)
- ...If I could find a way, I'd take back those words that'd hurt you and you'd stay. If I could reach the stars, I'd give 'em all to you, Then you'd love me, love me, like you used to do. (If I Could Turn Back Time by Cher)

There are lots of other places we use the word “turn”. Turn signals. A turn of events. Take a wrong turn. Turn up the heat. Turn up the volume.

In all these cases, we are talking about change. In some of those songs, change is neither likely nor possible: longing to change the past or someone’s feelings. Yet other changes are inevitable. The seasons turn, the calendar pages turn as time goes on. But the kind of turning we are talking about today isn’t done with the steering wheel or a time machine. It is the direction of our lives,

which is steered by our hearts. Can you finish the words to this song? “I have decided to follow Jesus...” (No turning back.)

Last week we introduced Advent as the time to remember Jesus is returning, and we are to watch. Advent is a time of preparation. The question we ask ourselves is, “How are we to get ready?” The answer is, by turning, or to use a fancy church word, repenting. This was the message of John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. “Repent. Turn. The Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

It is both a new message and a familiar one. Don’t you wish things would change? When you’re at a red light, you wait for it to change to green. Granted, that doesn’t happen often in Bellaire! (No stoplights.) But I wish people would change, don’t you? Don’t you want to see people stop doing the things that hurt themselves and the world? Drugs, pollution, anger, bitterness, greed...the list is too long to mention. I wish people would see how their decisions are destroying each other and this world.

John the Baptist wanted people to change. That’s why he preached his message of turning, of repentance.

This is a strange story, honestly. It occurs in a strange place. The Desert of Judea is a hot, dry, remote area, which has been mostly uninhabited throughout history. (Pictures.) There’s certainly nothing like it in Michigan, and it was a highly unlikely place for crowds to gather. Yet the Bible says John the Baptist lived and preached there.

And speaking of strangeness, is there a stranger man in all of the Bible? Look at Matthew 3:4-5. “John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist.” This is not cashmere, folks. It’s “stinky, rough, dirty cloth crudely woven from the hair of stinky, rough, dirty camels.” (Rev. Dawn

Chessar, umcdiscipleship.org) “His food was locusts and wild honey.” Yuck. John was the ultimate wild man.

His message was equally wild. He didn’t host a lecture with a slideshow and five excellent bullet points. He shouted his message with no reservations. He had to shout – the desert was a big place, so I bet people needed to hear his voice to find him. “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is near!” I imagine he resembled some characters we see in movies, standing on the street corners in New York City with cardboard signs. Normally, you and I tend to avoid such people.

But that’s not what the Bible says happened. The people came from all over to see John. And they did something amazing. They confessed their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River. A small, muddy stream on the edge of the desert. (picture)

Everyone was getting in on this act, but not everyone was welcome. John was very critical of the Pharisees and Sadducees – two of the ruling parties in Jewish society – who came to the Jordan as well. The Bible doesn’t say if they were coming to be part of the repenting crowd, or if they were just curious onlookers, trying to get in on the popular movement. John had some harsh words for them. He called them a brood of vipers – literally, snake babies. He told them their history didn’t matter. They could claim Abraham as their father, but what really mattered were their actions. “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance,” John told them. (Matt. 3:8) He compared them to trees, warning them that the ax was ready to cut them down if they didn’t produce “good fruit.” (Matt. 3:10)

We would think John was crazy for all this, right? That’s how Matthew portrays him. Out in the hot, dry desert, shouting at people, criticizing respected

leaders of society. This feels like some extreme right-wing group standing on the street corners, shouting at congressmen and women as they walk by the capitol building.

But look at what John said next. “After me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry.” (Matt. 3:11) You see, whereas some radicals get carried away with their rhetoric, John takes an unexpected, humble stance. He predicts Jesus is coming – and John isn’t worthy to carry Jesus’ stinky, dirty sandals. John is that far beneath Jesus. Honestly, it would make more sense if John was shouting his message at the temple, in the busy streets of Jerusalem, claiming to be the greatest prophet in the world, rather than humbling himself in the wastelands. But he wasn’t arrogant, and that’s why I think we can trust what he said.

John’s message seems to be so strict, so dangerous, so judgmental. He uses words like snakes, wrath, axes, cut down, fire, burn. He says Jesus is coming to thresh with his winnowing fork (picture) – not the “winning” fork, but a hay fork used to separate good wheat from useless straw by flinging it in the air. The wheat will be stored in the barn, the chaff burned up. This is truly a message of upheaval. What’s going on?

Here’s the deal. John, despite his appearance and location, was not someone to be trifled with. He had a serious message on a serious topic: how to change your life. Maybe John had a good reason for going out to the desert to preach. Maybe he intentionally chose a remote place that was difficult to get to – a place without distraction. A place you don’t come across by accident. A place you have to want to get to.

I don't believe that the people were coming out of curiosity. I believe they wanted to change. They were hoping for a Messiah, a Savior. They believed John was a prophet, maybe something more. And what they found was something better. A chance to change. A chance to repent. A chance to turn. John's message was a lot different from the Jewish authorities of the day. They were all about following rules, crossing T's, dotting I's, following the law and traditions to the letter. But we can't be perfect. No one can. To try only makes us feel worse. What they needed, and what we need, is confession. A chance to live a different life. And they found it in the wilderness, in a fiery, strange looking man.

(Picture) Have you ever been part of the crowd? Are you looking for answers? Think of all the places people flock to: the stores, the malls, the self-help section of the bookstore, the bars, our TV's, our smartphones. If we can just get to the busy places, maybe we will find something that helps medicate this gnawing sensation inside of us that all is not right with the world or with us. The problem is, even though you follow the crowd because something exciting is happening, when you leave, you don't feel any different than before.

Here's the deal. It's not about the shouting; it's not about the location. John's message is serious because sin is serious. We can't talk about forgiveness unless we talk about confession. We can't talk about grace until we talk about brokenness. We can't talk about mercy until we admit our need for it.

You can't talk about Christmas without talking about Easter. Yes, we sing songs about "Comfort and Joy" and "Silent Night," but as a Christian church, we are serious about our need to turn, to repent, to stop walking toward sin and death, and start walking in the other direction, towards light, life, love, and God. The difference between a believer and unbeliever is not who sins. We all sin. The

difference is which direction you run. When a non-believer sins, they run away from God. When a believer sins, they run toward God. They repent. They turn.

In this church, we want to offer that same life change that John was talking about. Some churches do an altar call – a chance to come forward, express your remorse, and pray to follow Jesus. But we don't do altar calls here. For starters, this is a table, not an altar. We don't offer sacrifices on it. But whatever you call it, this piece of furniture is stationary. You eventually leave the church and the altar. That's why we offer something else: A call to discipleship. This is the call to repent, to turn around, to change, and to follow Jesus. It's not easy, and that's good. Nothing worthwhile is easy.

Jesus will return. He will come to judge. Jesus does ask us to lay down our lives, our selfish, sinful decisions, and live for him instead. John is giving us the best advice possible to prepare for Jesus' return. We need to admit we are sinners, and repent of our sin, so that we can enter the kingdom of heaven.

Which crowd are you in? The active, repenting, baptized, believing crowd, the one which doesn't take your salvation for granted? Or are you the passive, judgmental, snaky crowd, content to watch from the sidelines, and trust in your own "good works"?

Preparing for Christ's return means giving ourselves anew to him. Receiving his grace. Allowing the Spirit of Christ to enter into our hearts. When that happens, it causes us to "give ourselves over again and again, all our lives. The seasons of the Christian Year, especially Advent and Lent, remind us of this need and call us annually to commit ourselves anew to Christ." (Dawn Chessar)

If we want to experience the true meaning of Christmas, we should start with John's advice. Repent. Turn to God, again and again and again, as often as we must, to live the kind of life God wants us to have, in the presence of Christ.

Memory verse

Matthew 3:2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Reflection questions

1. What most excites you about Christmas? What most frustrates you?
2. What do you think the people were looking for when they went to see John? How do you relate to their longings?
3. What is the strangest Christian message you have ever seen or heard? What did the messenger do? Say?
4. What do you think Jesus will do when he returns? What do you think he will change about the world?
5. What can you change right now about the world? About yourself?
6. How will you turn to God?