

“Turning Over a Rock?”

Date: Dec. 4, 2011

Theme: repentance, change

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Advent 2, Year B

Text: Mark 1:1-8

His name was John. People knew him locally as *the Baptist*. Some would say he was a religious eccentric. Others would dismiss him as a flake, or a weirdo. And for us as well, John just doesn't seem to fit in with the shepherds and wise men and the other characters that we traditionally associate with the Christmas story.

And yet, this was God's unlikely servant, chosen to announce the spectacular events that would soon follow. A most *unlikely* public relations man for sure. But still, God's own man.

When John began his ministry, he lived in the desert in the solitude of Judea, a rugged, desert wilderness. He fed on locusts and wild honey. He dressed in shirts made of camel hair. He constantly brooded over the scriptures, especially the prophetic ministry of Elijah, after whom he modeled his own ministry.

John preached the message of repentance. People needed to get right with God. He told them to stop their sinning, to seek God and to change their ways. John, the Baptist, was quite effective as a preacher. Many people came to listen to him preach. They believed him, and they asked to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

John knew that God was going to do something that would shake the foundations of the earth. He also knew that people needed to prepare for this earth-shattering event. You see, what was about to happen was that Jesus would begin *His* ministry, and the world would be introduced to the Son of God.

Jesus was the long-awaited Savior, for whom the prophet Isaiah foretold. He was the one who would save people from their sins. And so, John preached:

“Repent! Get ready! That’s a pretty good message for Advent as well.

If we don’t know, or believe, that we need a Savior, then *why have Christmas?*

Oh, sure, the holiday is fun, with all of its decorations and gift-giving and families getting together. Christmas is certainly good for the economy, so they say. But we wouldn’t even *have* Christmas, if it weren’t for the fact that Christ came into the world to save sinners. Without *that*, Christmas is empty.

So this morning I’d like to look at the word *repentance*. But I’d like to look at it from a slightly different angle. It’s important to recognize the wrong that we’ve done. But too often we get bogged down in feeling guilty. The word repentance does not simply mean saying, “I’m sorry.” It also involves change. To repent means to turn around.

One pastor I read put it like this: “If you don’t want to change, don’t become a Christian. When our Lord gets hold of folks, he changes them.” Then he went on to tell a story. Two guys fell asleep on a houseboat tied to a pier.

Tied too loosely, it turned out, because the boat got free and floated down stream for quite a distance, before the two guys woke up. Opening his eyes, the one fellow said to the other, “Hey, Joe! We ain’t here any more.”

That’s what happens to people who give their hearts to Jesus Christ. You don’t stay where started. And that’s what God wants. Yes, God loves and accepts us just as we are. But God doesn’t want us to stay there. In fact, God loves us too much to leave us the way we are. God wants us to grow, and to change, and to be different.

But here’s *our* part. We have to cooperate. We must be pliable, or the potter can’t fashion the clay. We have to be *willing*. We have to be *available* to God.

Rev. Doug Bailey, in a sermon entitled “Hard Truth for Advent,” tells the story about a group of nuns who went on vacation. They were taking a break from their difficult ministry of working with inner city kids in Cleveland, Ohio. They worked with youngsters whose lives were at risk in so many areas. A generous benefactor, who appreciated the ministry that the nuns were doing, decided to pay for their vacation.

He rented them vans; paid for their motel rooms and gave them a food allowance and spending money. Grateful for the chance to get away, they headed for the Rocky Mountains, a place where many of them had never been. They were awed by the glory of the mountains. They would stop, and ponder, and behold. They couldn’t take their eyes off of the majesty they were experiencing.

But they noticed that every time they stopped, Sister Margaret, one of the smallest members of their Order, would move to the edge of the group and disappear for a while. She’d return some time later. But no one knew what she was doing. So, on one particular occasion, they decided to follow her, and find out what she was doing.

The next time they stopped to behold a majestic view, Sister Margaret slipped away from the group and made her way down into a gully. They watched her as she walked down the path. She bent down, and reached under a sizable rock, and then turned it upside down. She brushed her hands, and walked back up the trail.

When she reached the top, she discovered the entire order of nuns was watching her. “Sister Margaret, what are you doing?” they asked. “I’m turning over a rock,” she replied. “Why?” they asked. “Do you do that every time?”

She answered, “Yes. Because I’ll never pass this way again, and it is my

intent to have made a difference while I was here. So, I turn some rocks over, so that this place is different because I passed here. It's kind of my philosophy of life."

Hmmmm. What rocks do we need to turn over? In our families? in the community of Millcreek? in the city of Erie? in the United Methodist Church? What could we do, so that this place would be different because we passed through here?

And I wonder, what rocks in our lives do we need to turn over, so that we are different, for the sake of God's kingdom of love? I like that image of turning over rocks, making a difference *where* we are. Making a difference *who* we are.

If Christ came to save sinners, and if we admit with God's help that we are sinners, I wonder in what ways we need saving? What, in my life, is God asking me to change? What about in your own life, what rock is God asking you to turn over, so that it makes a difference?

If you and I hear the voice of John the Baptist calling us to repent, and if we choose to respond with true repentance, God will bring about a change in us. I'd like to believe that christmas brings out the best in us, not just for this particular season, but all year round.

Let's take just a minute to think about what in our own lives we need to change, that we need to confess. What rock in your life, will you let God turn over, so that it makes a difference where you are, and who you are? Let us pray silently.