

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Revisiting Repentance**  
**Luke 3:2-22**  
**Baptism of Jesus Sunday**  
**January 8, 2017**

John the Baptist always comes across as a bit of a loose cannon to me. Let’s just say, he’s not exactly the preacher I’d invite to fill the pulpit when I’m gone. I’d be way too nervous he’d make a mess of things, saying what he shouldn’t be saying... in some extreme way.

I mean here he is, out in the desert, kind of making a spectacle. He’s in an extreme place, wearing itchy camel skins, eating locusts and honey. Just from the looks of things, there’s something off about this guy.

And if you’ll get close enough, you’ll hear him shouting his extreme message **“You brood of vipers. The axe is at the root, ready to cut you down and throw you into the fire!”** --- Merry Christmas, Ebenezer.

Actually, John the Baptist always comes across to me as some strange mixture of a street preacher... and the Tasmanian Devil.

So, just imagine what might happen if you showed up for worship and saw him sitting here. You’d probably figure he was some homeless guy who needed a meal. The last thing you’d expect is for him to walk up to the pulpit and start preaching.

And if he did? Well... starting off his sermon with **“brood of vipers”** wouldn’t go over too well, would it?

Of course, he might have come up with a more modern insult for all of us. I don’t know. That’s the problem with John. You don’t know where or what or who he’s going to target next.

So, between his appearance, his approach, and his demeanor, I don’t naturally trust John too much... and I have the tendency to not take him too seriously.

But I’ve been thinking this week that my caricature of John might have more to say about me than it has to say about the cousin of Jesus.

After all, even Jesus goes out and is baptized by him. Apparently Jesus thought there was something important to hear,  
and to encounter,  
and to face out there in the wilderness... with John the Baptist.

So, maybe my caricature is just a way of keeping John *and his message* at an arm's distance. In fact, maybe it has a lot more to say about how we tend to think about this *whole idea of repentance* than anything else.

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After all, part of what we don't like about a call to repentance is that, just like John, you're never quite sure where it's going to aim next, right? You and I know we're not perfect. And quite frankly, sometimes trying to be perfect is just down right exhausting.

So, we're not all that inclined to be around someone or something that's going to take aim at one more thing we're not quite doing right, are we?

I mean, it would be one thing if we knew what to expect. That's what's so nice about legalism, you know. The rules are set. Follow the 10 particular commandments and you know you're OK.

You don't hear this too often in the church, but I think following legalism,  
following some formula for your salvation,  
following the law,  
is a whole lot safer and a whole lot easier. That's why we always start there in our spiritual life and why the bible starts there, too.

Rules/Legalism are like training wheels for our spiritual life.

**"Do these things, and they will point you in the right direction. You know you're OK..."**

**"Follow these guidelines and you know you're on the right path."**

It's where the great story of the Bible begins and it's where all healthy spirituality begins. Remember, the bible is like a road map to our spiritual lives.

The guidelines given in the first half of the Bible parallel the guidelines we all need in the first half of life, spirituality.

And we, as a church, need to remember that.

Rules and guidelines and clear morality have an important role for all of us. They help us get started on the spiritual journey, whether you're 5 or 15 or 55.

But they also limit where we can go. You can't go mountain biking with training wheels on. If you try, you're likely to crash and break an arm.

The law will only take you so far. And the great arc of biblical wisdom shows us that sometimes the rules will trip us up. They can become our pitfall...

Eventually, there comes a time to live by the spirit rather than by the law.

You may have seen the quote from the Dalai Lama that gets at this idea: **"Learn and obey the rules well... so you will know how to break them properly."**

That's good, but honestly, I like the way Pablo Picasso says it even better.  
***"Learn the rules like a pro, ... so you can break them like an artist."***

A mature spirituality is one that teaches us and guides us to become artists of *Life*. It's one that gets us past the flat concrete surface, so we can start ride up the mountain of delight.

That's where the arc of the bible is taking us. That's where the Gospel and where Jesus is taking us:

We begin with the law. We learn to hold it. To follow it.

And then we learn to transcend the law... (not get rid of it, but transcend it) guided by something deeper, the very *spirit of life* itself... ***"Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist."***

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That being said, it's pretty easy to start to think we don't need John's message of repentance. I mean, *that's so Old Testament, you know. All this talk of Repentance, that's so Street-Preacher-Legalism, just pulling us back down the mountain...*

Or so we tend to think, because... for a lot of us, the whole idea of repentance has gotten twisted and mixed up with images of street preachers and shame and guilt. When we think of repentance we think of confessing some huge, deep, dark evil in our lives. Or maybe we think of it as someone trying to manipulate us into feeling really bad about ourselves.

Certainly there are some streams of the church... both Catholic and Protestant, that take that route and want to remind you, week after week, of how fundamentally evil you are, "and don't you forget it!"

Maybe some of you grew up in that.

Every week you were told how wretched humanity is,  
how wretched you are,  
and how completely broken, sorry, and remorseful you should feel...  
every week... of every month... of every year... of your entire life because that's just how wretched we all are.

Some of us grew up with the idea that this is what repentance looks like. It's forcing yourself to feel bad about yourself and bad about your life...

But that's not it at all.

Now, don't get me wrong. There are times to be that deeply remorseful. There are times for tears... when we've wounded someone, or betrayed someone, or even betrayed our God, in the path we've chosen. There are certainly times for the deepest gut-wrenching kind of repentance.

But none of us are called to live our whole lives there. And if that's the only kind of repentance you know, then chances are you've either

become addicted to a cathartic emotionalism disguised as spirituality.  
or you've decided that John the Baptist and his message is just a bit too  
extreme... and not for you.

After all, you're basically a good person. As far as you can tell, there's not that  
much to repent about. Your "sins" (if you'd even call them that) are probably all pretty  
socially acceptable stuff. You know, the usual:

Speeding... I don't think that counts, do you?

A bit of anxiety here and there.

Maybe a sharp tongue, on occasion.

Maybe a bit of social gossip every now and then, but all of us are guilty of that.

It's not that you'd claim to be perfect. It's just that repentance, all that groveling  
and self-loathing, well... it seems a bit dramatic, especially if we're not going to be  
bound by legalism anymore.

**"Brood of vipers"?** *It's a bit much, don't you think, John?*

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But the thing is, the practice of repentance is actually quite different from what  
we're imagining it to be...

Repentance isn't what keeps us from climbing the mountain,

It's what sets us free to make the journey.

And believe it or not, John the Baptist ***is actually*** showing us the way.

When the crowds ask him what they are supposed to do, notice that John doesn't  
tell them to go flagellate themselves. Or to go put on sack cloth and mourning. No. In  
fact, John gives them some real simple basic instructions:

If you have two coats, share.

If you have food and you know someone who's hungry, share it.

And then to the tax collectors he says, **"Don't collect more than you're  
supposed to, even though you can."**

And finally to the soldiers, **"Don't extort anyone, or threaten them. Be content  
with what you already have."**

It's all pretty simple stuff, don't you think? It ***simple***, but it's also ***pointed and  
specific***. It's specific to who they are and what they do... because what we need to  
repent of most often are the specific things in our lives that have started to take over.

In fact, his instructions get to the heart of what St. Ignatious calls ***"disordered  
attachments."***

Disordered attachments are good things in our lives...that have become too  
important to us.

They can be all kinds of things... like wages, and money, clothes and food... that John talks about. They can be other good things too, other gifts in our lives... things like: people, places we love, our jobs, titles, hobbies, honors given to us.

All things that can be good and a blessing, but also the very things most likely to move into the center of our lives, nudging God off to the side, and ever so subtly, begin to enslave us.

They take over, when we're not paying attention. .

They control us... and we don't even realize it

In the most covert of ways... they start controlling our emotions, our ambitions, our decisions, even our relationships.

...which is why Ignatius calls them disordered loves, or disordered attachments. They have become central... usurping God's place in our lives, trapping us in their power... and we don't even recognize it.

Repentance...is the work of looking honestly enough at your motivations to recognize your disordered attachments.

Repentance... is the invitation to become free again.

It's a freedom that comes back to us when we recognize that something has become more important than it should be.

"If you have two coats... and someone else has none, then you probably need to let one of them go.

**"If you're striving after more wealth, then it's time to start living for justice."**

John's call to repentance, the practice of repentance, is the practice of being set free from what the book of Hebrews describes as the **"sin that so easily entangles."**

The point isn't self loathing and groveling, or shame. The point of repentance is Spiritual Freedom... an Interior freedom that only comes when God is at the center of our hearts and lives.

It's our interior freedom that allows us to know and be honest about who we are and who we are not: to live at peace with both our gifts and our limitations.

It's the freedom of mind and heart that comes when our interior world is properly ordered... when God remains at the center of our being, when our most fundamental identity isn't rooted in all these other things, but is rooted in Christ alone.

For that to be the case, repentance can't be a one time thing. It's more a practice that we need regularly, woven into the rhythm of our lives. A practice of observing ourselves, of paying attention to our motivations, of noticing what drives us.

Because, you see, every day we are bombarded with all kinds of other preoccupations... things that create chaos in our souls, things that get in the way of hearing and responding to God.

We are bombarded with our fears, the need to control, our obsessions, with envy, resentments, excessive self-doubts.

And so, if we're keeping John the Baptist, and his invitation, at an arm's distance...  
then we're also keeping the path to spiritual freedom a safe distance away.

So, instead of dismissing him today.  
I want to invite you to hear him well:

Repent, he says.

Not grovel. Not self-loathing, but repent: Look honestly. What are the disordered attachments controlling you these days? What are the things you need to give away or let go of or stop chasing after?

Repent... that is. Recognize them. Name them. Watch for them.

Repent... and move Christ back into the center of what drives you,  
the center of your commitments,  
into the very center place of your life.

Repent... and find the joy and delight that comes from interior freedom,  
the freedom to be who you are created to be,  
the spiritual freedom to ascend to the mountaintops.

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If you're ready to do that, then I want to invite you to remember your baptism, that first day you were soaked in the sacred waters, and claimed by God. You're baptism began with repentance and with commitment. And today you're invited into that same rhythm again.

When you come forward for communion today, you'll pass a bowl of water... each with glass stones at the bottom. The water is to remind us of our baptismal waters.

As you come to them, you're invited to dip your hands in the sacred waters... and remember that you have been soaked in the life of God. Remember that you have been given to God wholly and completely.

And then reach in and take a stone. Keep that stone.  
Let that stone be the rock of your repentance.

Carry it in your pocket... put it on your nightstand, or in your bathroom, and when you see it this year:

Remember your baptism.

Remember that repentance is an ongoing practice.

Ask your self again, what are the disordered attachments working on my soul?  
What do I need to let go of to live with a Deep Spiritual Freedom given to me by God?