



St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401

Parish Offices & Education Building
located at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.
Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone: 410-267-9333
Fax: 410-280-3181
www.stannes-annapolis.org

The Rev. Amy Richter
3 Advent C: Luke 3:7-18
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Cold Water First

It happens every year, right around this time. I start to get those warm fuzzy feelings that come with the holidays. I start to think about the parts of the season I like best: beautiful Christmas music. Time with friends and loved ones. The excitement of finding just the right gift. Reminiscing about childhood memories: the smell of gingerbread, seeing the tree lit up for the first time. I get excited about Christmas Eve worship, the beauty of our faces bathed in the soft glow of candlelight, singing Silent Night.

And then, just as I'm getting so cozy in my Christmas reveries, in walks John the Baptist to dump a bucket of cold Jordan River water over my head. "You brood of vipers!" he yells. Makes "Happy Holidays" sound like a great compromise. Not the seasonal greeting I was hoping for. No wonder my Christmas cookie cutter set doesn't include a John the Baptist shape. John the Baptist sugar cookie, anyone?

But here he is, in our readings, in our hymns, an important part of our preparations to welcome the Christ child, to prepare to meet Christ in our midst. Here he is preaching repentance, not to ruin our Christmas preparations, but to enable us to know true joy.

Repent, says John. Get washed and ready. You will soon meet the Messiah. The time is shorter than you know. Repent.

On the subject of repentance, it's easy for us to get confused. We hear of someone like John the Baptist and we think of some crazed street corner preacher. Or some angry TV evangelist shaking his fist and trying to get us to feel bad, really bad about ourselves. We think of some stern school master making us write on the blackboard a thousand times, "I have been a really, really, really bad person," until our fingers ache and we're covered in chalk dust and feeling nothing like the joy that Paul is talking about in Philippians. "Rejoice always," says Paul, "again I will

say, Rejoice!” Sure, just as soon as I get through with detention. I’m really not in the mood for joy. I don’t think I qualify for joy.

But that’s not repentance. That’s remorse – that horrible, soul-sucking, draining, and, unfortunately sometimes quite justified and well-deserved feeling that what you’ve done is despicable, that to call you a “viper” might actually be a complement. That’s remorse. The word comes from roots meaning “to bite again.” And yes, it describes “a gnawing distress arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs, as Merriam-Webster so aptly puts it. The feeling might fit. But remorse will get you nowhere.

And it’s not what John the Baptist, or the Church, is talking about. John wanted to lead people through the Jordan River, not drown people in it. John is talking about repentance.

Repentance means more than an emotional “feeling sorry for my sins.” It’s a much more active word. It means doing a 180. It means you took a wrong turn and now you have to turn around. It means realizing you don’t know where you’re going, or you know that where you’re going won’t get you anywhere you need to be. If you’re lost in the woods, feeling sorry about it, or sorry for yourself won’t do you much good. You’ll still be lost in the woods. You’ll just be lost and sorry. Repentance is turning around, turning toward God and taking action.

And I know this is hard, especially for some of us. But the action may be asking for directions. It may be asking for help. It will be accepting help when it shows up.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said repentance is like this. You’ve gotten your car stuck in the mud. You’re spinning your wheels, mud is flying and you’re getting nowhere. You keep gunning the engine as if somehow doing it more will produce different results. Then, someone comes along with a board to put under your wheels, something to give you some traction. They’re willing to put that board under there and hook you up for a tow. Remorse is saying, no, I got myself into this mess. I deserve this mess. I think I’ll just spin my wheels for awhile longer. Repentance is saying, thank you, accepting the help and getting back onto the pavement.

Repentance is accepting help and guidance from Jesus and the people he sends to us; turning around, turning to God and going in a new direction.

“What then shall we do?” the people ask John the Baptist. A straightforward question. And John gives a straightforward answer. Sometimes the Bible isn’t hard because it’s difficult to understand. Sometimes the Bible is hard because it is so clear. Here’s what John says: Share. Share what you have with people who need it. Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.” To the tax collectors John says, Don’t cheat people in your job. To the soldiers John says, Don’t make threats or false accusations.

Share. Don’t cheat. Don’t use force or threats to get what you want from people. Don’t lie. Straightforward. But hard. It sounds easy in the abstract, but John calls us to be specific. As William Blake put it, “He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars. General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer.” John gave practical instructions for people in their particular situations. His words to tax collectors addressed the particular temptations and pitfalls of their occupation. Same with soldiers.

So what about us? What would John say to you and me? What are the temptations and hazards and pitfalls of our occupations? Of the rounds of our days? What are the risks to our spiritual health of being a teacher? A mother at home? An attorney? A sales rep? A high school student? A doctor? What kind of fruit do you bear? Can you bear? What would be worthy of the life to which you are called? Think about it. Be as specific as you can. And do it.

John’s message of repentance wasn’t simply about feeling sorry for our sins, and certainly not about feeling sorry for or about ourselves. It was about changing our lives. What must we do to prepare for the coming of Christ and his kingdom? The answer isn’t to go to our rooms and reflect on the sorry state of our souls. The answer isn’t feel bad or guilty. John the Baptist will have none of that. John knows that with the coming of Christ we are faced with something so great and so precious that we must repent, turn around, turn toward God through deeds as costly and specific as sharing clothing and food. We must live in this world and bring to this world the fruits of our repentance, actions that show we are aligned with the justice and peace, wholeness and generosity God wants to show us in Christ. Live in a way that we would be happy to have God know about. And do it now.

This is how we prepare for Christmas joy. Jesus Christ came not only to save us, but to change us so that we might be ready to receive him into our hearts so that true joy may be ours.

When Christmas comes this year, I know that warm feeling will return. I look forward to seeing this beautiful place and your beautiful faces bathed in candlelight, reminding me of the incarnate love of God. Singing Silent Night will feel holy. Hearing the choir will probably bring tears to my eyes. I will long to kneel down before the manger and wonder at the mystery of God coming to us as a helpless child. I will join my voice with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven as they sing, "Glory to the New Born King." And I pray that through my encounter with John the Baptist, I will be ready to welcome Christ into my heart once again.