

## **Metanoia**

January 10, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Matthew 3:1-17**

Today is, on the church calendar, what is traditionally known as “Baptism of the Lord Sunday.” And just so that you know where we are going, I am going to be spending the next little while working us through some of the big stories of Matthew’s gospel – hitting a lot of the high moments of Jesus’s life and ministry. We started last week on Epiphany Sunday with Matthew’s telling of the story of the Wise Men following the star and discovering an unspeakable and overwhelming joy when God revealed God’s self to them in the simple, ordinariness of the moment.

And then today, we are skipping over a couple of decades – because Matthew himself skips at least 20, maybe even 30 years – and the next time we see Jesus it is not as a baby, or as a toddler, but as a fully-grown man. How many of us wish we could have just skipped our adolescent years altogether? Matthew graciously does Jesus that service.

And when the scene opens on today’s story, our first glimpse is of a man named John the Baptist. John is Jesus’ cousin – the one who, at least in Luke’s telling of the story, leaped, as an unborn baby in his mother’s womb, when Mary showed up pregnant with Jesus. From even before the very beginning of their lives, John and Jesus shared a special relationship. John recognized something in Jesus that very few, if any, other people would have recognized. And John’s whole role – his main purpose in life – was to point to Jesus. To draw people to recognize their brokenness and to lay the foundation for Jesus to then come in and transform the world.

John was basically acting like a modern-day prophet of his time. In fact, the description that Matthew gives us of John is almost identical to the description the Old Testament gives us of the prophet Elijah.

And John’s message is...not subtle. He is not offering anybody “a spoonful of sugar” to help the medicine go down. In fact, his approach is to hurl insults at the crowd. “You brood of vipers!” he calls them. And then he yells warnings about eternal wrath and damnation. “The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” It kind of reads like Jonathan Edwards’ sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*: “*The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked...*”

John is busy at work scaring the hell out of the people. “Repent!” John is telling them. “Turn around! You are going in the wrong direction! If you don’t get right with God – and right now – there will, literally, be Hell to pay!”

And for John, the outward sign of that repentance – that turning around – that movement from death to life – is signified by the act of baptism. By coming and being washed clean. By dying and being reborn. By participating in this physical act, signifying that “I know I’ve messed up, and now I am going to live differently.”

And that is all well and good, but then Jesus comes in and complicates the story. *Jesus* comes, and presents himself to John to be baptized. And John is immediately – and understandably – confused. Baptism, after all, in John’s mind, is what we do when we need to repent. Baptism is our act of turning away from darkness and sin, and turning toward God. Our way of signifying the 180 that we need to make, so that we don’t find ourselves as a brood of vipers, or as spiders dangling over the pits of hell anymore. So why is Jesus coming to be baptized? Jesus doesn’t need to repent. Jesus doesn’t need to turn away from anything. Jesus is already tuned in to God. Heck, Jesus *is* God.

And John tells Jesus this. “What are you doing, Jesus? *I* need to be baptized by *you*. Why do you come to me? You do not need to come and repent. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Because it is right and fitting,” Jesus tells him.

Maybe baptism – and repentance – means a little bit more than meets the eye.

So John relents. He baptizes Jesus, and the moment Jesus comes up out of the water the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and the voice of God booms out, declaring that Jesus is God’s Son, the beloved.”

So let’s talk about this word “repent.”

It’s a word that, in our current culture and climate doesn’t always have the most positive connotations. It is a word that is, unfortunately, yelled from a lot of street corners through bullhorns; shouted at strangers from angry street preachers. There are a lot of folks who have sort-of taken on John the Baptist’s style of preaching and the call to repentance has sort-of gotten equated with a kind of verbal abuse – yelling at people over their worst mistakes, berating them for the way they live, and dangling the threat of hell as a motivator.

To the point that, for a good chunk of our society, the moment I hear the word “repent” is the moment I tune you out.

But that doesn't change the fact that the word "repent" is found over, and over, and over again throughout scripture – *especially* throughout the New Testament. It is clearly a key part of our journey of faith. So, what, exactly, *does* it mean?

Actually, in the New Testament there are two different Greek words that are both translated into our English word "repent." They both have the same root – *meta* – meaning "after" or "beyond," but they are still different words with very different meanings. The first word is *metamelomai*. *Metamelomai* is the word that we see in Matthew 27, after Judas Iscariot has handed Jesus over to be crucified. This passage tells us that once Judas sees that Jesus has been condemned, "he repented" – *metamelomai* – and tried to return the 30 pieces of silver.

*Metamelomai* speaks of a kind of deep grief, a deep regret, a constant looking back, looking behind us toward everything that has gone wrong, everything that we have done wrong, everything that we've screwed up and made a mess of. And then, getting stuck there. It's a kind of "painful sorrow" that we just simply cannot break free from. A sense of hopelessness. In *metamelomai*, there is a level of awareness – a level of understanding – of the depths of our brokenness, the depths of our sinfulness. But that's basically where it ends. There is no hope for anything different. No hope for any change. No light in this darkness. "I am a sinner and I will forever be a sinner. Period." "I am Humpty Dumpty. I am broken, all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put Humpty together again." "I have made a horrible mistake and this mistake is going to forever define me, and therefore, I am trash."

Even though our English Bibles translate *metamelomai* as "repentance," this is not the kind of repentance that leads to life. It is not the kind of understanding that brings wisdom and growth. Just the opposite. It sows the seeds of death. Quite literally. In the story of Judas, just two verses after he has "repented," he is so mired down by guilt and despair that he ends his own life. *Metamelomai* is repentance without grace.

But then, there is another word in Greek for "repent," and this is the word that appears far more often throughout the New Testament. This is the word *metanoia*. Literally, *metanoia* means "beyond thought," or "movement beyond our thoughts." We sometimes translate it as "a change of mind," or "a change of heart," or even, on occasion, a "life change." Where *metamelomai* is recognizing our brokenness and getting stuck there with no way out, *metanoia* is active. It's vibrant. It has the connotation of constant learning, constant growth. Taking in new information, and then adjusting course, when necessary, based on what we have learned. In *metanoia*, we have never fully "arrived" – it's not like we repent, and then we are done. It is a constant process of becoming. Becoming more aware of who we are, and who God is, and who we are *because* is. Becoming more fully who God has created us to be each and every day. Being open to learning and growing, staying open to the possibility that we

might not always be right, but that God is still at work forming and shaping us. It is a *daily* journey; a *daily* process.

*Metanoia* means an openness to change. Which is sometimes really, really hard for us as people. But it also means an openness to hope. The belief that as we step closer and closer to the heart of God and discover our belovedness in Christ, it will no longer be yesterday that defines us. It's a belief that every misstep that we take, every painful season that we walk through, every bump in the road, every pandemic that we weather, every news cycle that draws us closer to the abyss, every strained relationship that we fight to keep alive, every dark and painful feeling that we feel, every dream deferred, every single one of these things is an invitation to *metanoia*. An invitation to a form of repentance. An invitation to be formed and shaped and molded and crafted and yes, even changed. An invitation to have our eyes opened wide – not to the bumps behind us but to the promises of God in front of us.

And *that* was what Jesus was doing. Did he come to repent? Yes. But not because of anything that he had done wrong. He came to present himself, ripe for change. To be claimed by God almighty. To be declared beloved. To be filled with the Spirit. And to move from where he had been into what he had come to earth to do.

For John the Baptist, repentance was about avoiding the worst that could happen. But for Jesus, it was about opening ourselves to the best. For John, it was about stepping out of the darkness and into the light. For Jesus, it was about stepping from the light into an even brighter light. For John, it was “y’all need to get right with God,” and for Jesus, it was “no matter where you are, there is still more of God yet to be revealed.”

My friends, let me be clear: It is not that John the Baptist was wrong and Jesus was right. There are times when we find ourselves *exactly* where John's followers found themselves: mired down in the muck and the mud and the brokenness, and desperately needing the grace of God to set us free from all of the many chains that bind us. We make mistakes. We turn away from God. We get bogged down in our own “stuff.” We allow our own selfish desires to drive our every action. We turn a blind eye to those in need. We speak when we should stay silent and we stay silent when we should speak out. We get “stuck in our ways” and we resist change. We cause harm, both to ourselves and others. We frequently find ourselves in need of the kind of deep repentance and “turning around” that John the Baptist called for.

But that's just the beginning. That's just the first step in this lifelong journey of what repentance *really* is – this journey of being surprised at every turn by the wonders and mysteries of God being revealed to us. This journey of believing that no matter what we have just walked through, the kingdom of God is in front of us – and therefore, we keep walking. This journey of continuing to allow ourselves to be changed, and then changed

again, and then changed again, trusting that at every turn the image of God will shine more brightly upon our souls.

Repentance is about turning around. Turning the page. Turning over a new leaf. Letting go of the resentments and the grudges of the past so that we can be free to welcome the newness that is revealing itself to us right now. Recognizing that 2020 was an awful year and 2021 maybe hasn't started off much better, but through the struggle and the twists and the turns, the Spirit of God still hovers over us and the voice of God still claims us and calls us beloved and then unleashes us on the world with a call to shine God's light and to live God's love and to speak God's truth and to model God's presence.

So my friends, may our minds and our hearts be opened and ripe for growth and change this day. May we move from *metamelomai* to *metanoia*. From hopelessness to a joy-filled, kingdom-driven hope for the future. From death to a vibrant life in Christ. And may you know that you are God's child, the beloved.