

**An Invitation and a Warning**  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
5 December 2004  
**Text: Matthew 3:1-12**

[Louise begins reading text: A reading from the gospel according to Matthew in the third chapter at the first verse, found on page 2 of the pew Bibles] *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming... Clark/John come out saying, “**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**” Louise continues, *This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many [religious leaders] coming for baptism, he said to them, “**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to fell from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as your ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.**”* Clark/John disappear. Louise: The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!]*

Salvation Army bell-ringers aren’t allowed to stand in front of Target stores this year. The giant discount chain made the decision based on research suggesting that people are bothered by having to walk by the bell-ringers and donation kettles on their way into the store. A company spokeswoman defended the action, pointing to the thousands of dollars Target contributes to charitable organizations, adding, “We just don’t want to make our customers uncomfortable.”

Well. I feel a little like Target management when considering today’s text. Every year we gather to worship in this holy season, seeking peace, seeking refreshment, and what do we get?! That fierce figure, John the Baptist. Talking about repentance.

Proclaiming the arrival of One who will judge between wheat and chaff, good and bad, naughty and nice (oops, wrong story!). Calling us a *bunch of snakes* and telling us we'd better shape up now in preparation for the One who is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and *fire* (which can burn like Hell!). Believe me, I'd like to send this text away from our sanctuary because it makes me as uncomfortable as it does you.

With discomfoting conviction, John is calling for change, plain and simple. Now a general call for change is not unwelcome. We all want things to get better. We want hungry children to be fed, warring nations to make peace, and lonely hearts to find love. We want Republicans and Democrats to move beyond partisan politics and get on with the nation's business. We want our church to grow and thrive. But John's message is disturbing because he's not painting with broad strokes. His call is very specific: it is directed to people of faith, people of privilege. John's message is not so much "things have gotta change" but rather, you and I have gotta change.

Recently I enjoyed the movie *Sideways*, a comedy skewering the kind of self-reflection that sometimes occurs around middle-age. Two friends are on an extended "bachelor party" visit to California's wine country prior to one of the friend's impending marriage. Over the course of the week, we learn about their checkered, self-absorbed lives: the disappointments, the failures, and the settling each has done in order to cope. While they manage to endear themselves to the viewer, I found myself concluding that they were headed sideways, neither up nor down, forward or backward, but simply into more of the same. For all their appealing eccentricities, neither man seemed willing or capable of change. And while change is challenging, even painful, it is also prerequisite to growth. Not to change, ultimately, is to die. So let's stay with our discomfort for a moment; as Presbyterian pastor and preacher extraordinaire Fred Craddock loved to say, the act of worship ought to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Not to annoy per se, but like the coal miners of old who used canaries to detect the presence of toxic gases in the underground mine shafts—to signal life-threatening conditions. So John's message functions to warn us of dangerous assumptions that can lead to death.

His call to repentance is a call to change—the word literally means to turn around, to go in a different direction. John the Baptist's strong words link the need to change with the arrival of the long-promised Messiah, the One God was sending to save the people. And the time is now, John proclaims; the kingdom is coming near. Change is going to happen in the advent of a Savior who will free the oppressed, rescue the broken, welcome the outcast, renew the creation, and bring all the

scattered families of the earth together. Now is the time to get ready; to make the necessary conversion in one's own life, and in the life of the faith community to open ourselves to these changes. On a Christmas card note from a friend far away came a prophetic call to action. He recalled how his father always replaced the typical farewell "Have a good day," with "*Make it* a good day." Don't be a passive recipient of what circumstance, culture, or chance dish out. Dare to decide. Choose to act. Show what matters to you by what you do. Risk the cost of change.

While in Ethiopia, I was deeply moved by the way the Presbyterian Church there unites worship and mission. Pastors and laypeople spoke with equal enthusiasm about lively, biblically-based worship *and* education initiatives, about care for persons living with HIV/AIDS, feeding and scholarship programs for street children. When I commented on this to one of the leaders, Pastor Ojot gave me a quizzical look and responded, "Jesus saves the whole person. How could we do any less?"

There is no split between the spiritual and material sides of life. There is to be no division between our worship and our mission, our beliefs and our actions. Pastor Ojot's words echo those of John the Baptist: *Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Let your life demonstrate your embrace of God's Kingdom.* Friends, do our practices and behaviors match up with the Kingdom's claims and vision? Can we plead for a gentler Christmas celebration without giving up some of the activities that make us frantic and leave no time for reflection? Can we pray for the poor without helping them? Can we decry youth violence and the instability of family life today, and not support our church's efforts to bring Open Doors after school program to our building, and establish a Boys & Girls Club in our city? Can we plead for peace in Iraq and the Middle East, and maintain grudges with people we know? The afflicting voice of John the Baptist warns us to bring our sideways lives into alignment with the Kingdom of God.

...and announces the advent of the One who can actually help us do it. If John's words illumine our need for change, then Jesus' life makes change possible. He gives us the strength to change our hearts, to change our minds and actions so that they reflect the Kingdom's values of justice, compassion, generosity and love. He gives us that primary characteristic which makes all other change possible, courage. Along with its warning, this text offers us an invitation: to receive the One who came that the world might have life, and have it abundantly. In Jesus Christ, we are saved---from our self-absorption, from complacency, from despair, from death. The meal we will share this morning is a remembrance that grace is free, but it isn't cheap. We remember a particular death that opened the way to life.

We are nourished by this bread and this cup for Kingdom-living, the glorious truth that God is here, working through us to accomplish far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine.

So let the bells ring! --at Target, at Fairmount, at your home and mine. Prepare the way of the Lord! Amen.

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