

Baruch and the Baptist
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
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In the Name of God; Creator, Christ, and Spirit. Amen.

Our readings this morning, taken together, display a subtle form of genius that reflects especially well on those who linked them in our lectionary. Let's work backwards. In the gospel, we're reintroduced to John the Baptist. John is fearsome, frightening, uncompromising, and hard. His reputation is well earned; John was fierce in the way he spoke to the self-righteous and to the rulers of his day. His honesty eventually cost him his life; a price he was more than willing to pay if the alternative was unfaithfulness. He lived in the desert, ate whatever nature provided, and dressed in animal skins. His message was clear and simple: Repent. Turn. Do differently.

To link John's ministry with the message from our first lesson is brilliant. Baruch is speaking a word of encouragement to captive people. In the midst of despair, he prophesies glory. Exiles return home; scattered children are gathered up; those led out on foot are brought back on royal thrones; sorrow and affliction give way to righteousness and rejoicing.

Now hold those two messages together. The baptized promise, when we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord. Note that the key word is *when* and not *if*. We will not love God entirely nor our neighbor mutually. We will, from time-to-time, diminish our humanity and that of our neighbor. We will fail to care for the creation in the way the Creator specified. We will do all that and more. What we will not do is remain stuck. We will go astray but we won't get lost. Like the exiled in Babylon, we turn and head home. And, on the way back, blessed by the grace and mercy of God, our path is made straight, low places are filled, high places leveled, the crooked straightened, and the rough made smooth.

And that, dear friends, is the Good News in a nutshell. Christians are not morose, self-mortifying, souls. The Christian life is marked by joy, peace, love, and trust – repentance is the way we return to that state when (not if) we forget our true identity and pay heed to our lesser angels. There are three basic steps in that journey home; we'll take a peek at each in just a moment. We do so because we sometimes get confused about repentance – we use the word often but unpack it rarely. I also, frankly, offer this in the wake of this week's news regarding the reported lapses of Tiger Woods. I'm not in any sense condoning his behavior – it was self-centered and deeply destructive – but, as the global media records every gaffe, it's easy to forget that Tiger is living out in the international spotlight the same drama we all have to deal with at some time in

our life, the heart-breaking awareness that we all fall short of the glory of God. So let's look at repentance now in three parts.

The first step in repentance is confession. When (not if) you do or say something that hurts another person, admit it freely. Don't deny it. Acknowledge that your action was hurtful. Feel the other person's pain. Both parts of that – admitting and feeling - are important. How often have you seen someone fall short in some way and then, when confronted, begin to lie or, even worse, become enraged?

I'll never forget an incident that occurred while golfing as a teenager. We were waiting in the fairway for the people on the green to putt out when a fellow on the tee behind us hit into our group. The ball struck my friend in the thigh. Startled, we turned to look, and, rather than apologize, the man cussed us out. I saw in that moment an unfortunate but common human tendency – our ability to turn a bad situation into calamity because of our unwillingness to own our part in the breach. Christians don't do that – we're humble enough to know we will sin and even more humble in our willingness to admit it when it happens. We have the grace to say we're sorry.

The second step in repentance is atonement. We not only admit we've hurt someone else, we do all we can to repair the situation. I've told this story before but I still get a chuckle out of it. When I was ten, my parents went to Carmel for the weekend and left my older brother and me at our grandmother's home in Berkeley. We went on a candy stealing spree, bagging at least ten dollars worth of swag. We were two little boys choosing to be bad and bold, to stretch it, to see what we could get away with. I was the John Dillinger of M&Ms. My mom could barely pick up our suitcase on Sunday evening. Our friends gorged for weeks.

Nine years later, convicted by the gospel, I went back to the Penny Saver Market on Shattuck Avenue, waited in line, confessed my sin, and gave the clerk twenty dollars to cover their loss. The clerk was addled; he had to call the manager – they couldn't figure out how to ring that up. I left the problem to them and walked out of the store feeling great. Christians, whenever possible, don't just bemoan their lapses but do something active to restore the offended party.

And that, by the way, is the whole premise behind the restorative justice movement. This is a new effort within the criminal justice system that challenges our older practice of retributive justice. Rather than merely punishing criminals, some are more concerned with restoring wholeness to both the aggrieved and the aggressor. The advocates of restorative justice insist that those who commit crimes be held responsible for their actions; they hear the witness of the aggrieved and they are required to restore that which was lost or stolen. In the best cases, a relationship develops. The criminal has to come to terms with the humanity of the victim and, in the process we pray, come into a deeper

awareness of their own humanity. It's only an experiment at this point but, in your preacher's humble opinion, it does carry gospel resonance.

The third step in repentance is amendment of life. We commit to stop doing the thing that's causing the problem. There are times when we can manage this in a snap and other times when we'll have to try over and over again to put a besetting sin away. This latter state is like learning to ski or ride a bike - we'll take a few tumbles before we find our balance. That's part of the growth process and we can't achieve mastery without enduring it. The key is not to give into despair and give up.

And sometimes we need help in order to make these changes in our lives. Counselors, therapists, 12-Step sponsors, support groups, pastors, wise friends, family members, and many others can hold us accountable to new commitments without turning the relationship into a grievous burden (for either party). Someone once remarked that accountability relationships are important but they shouldn't feel like IRS audits. That's very wise; we won't stay with them if they do. But real change usually requires positive action – good intentions rarely suffice – and, more often than not, it also requires communal support. It takes a village to raise a Christian. Committed Christians are, once again, humble enough to admit their need for others to be with them on the journey toward wholeness and healing.

So there it is: repentance – the path back from exile and despair. Confession. Atonement. Amendment of life. I did it and I'm sorry. I'll do what I can to fix it. I won't do it again and I'll ask for help, as needed. That's the good news of John the Baptist. We're willing to walk that hard path with him because we desperately long to return to and exult in the promises of the prophet Baruch, our God-given state of joy, peace, love, trust, and liberation.

We end now by hearing again the encouraging words of that ancient seer: Take off the garment of sorrow and affliction, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. For God will lead you with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and the righteousness that come from him. Amen.