

Repentant Disciples
Matthew 3:1-17
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This morning we move past the prelude of Matthew's gospel, past the so frequent quotes from the prophets in the birth narrative of Matthew that he practically wraps the Christ child in the scrolls of Isaiah, past all of that and we come to the wilderness. Let's see — a man named Joseph goes to Egypt to save his family and then 25 years later, a prophet speaks in the midst of the wilderness.

For Matthew's readers, largely believed to be Gentiles who had converted to Judaism, understand this is not an easy task. It would almost seem like Matthew was punking them. "This sounds a lot like the book of Exodus, Matthew," they might say. And he will say, "We're just getting started."

In the wilderness we encounter Elijah. No, I'm sorry, my glasses weren't clean. We encounter John the Baptist, a prophet living on the edges of society, eating strange foods and calling all to repentance.

Wait a minute. Are we sure this isn't Elijah? He sounds a lot like that ancient prophet of Israel. And that is, I'm sure, part of Matthew's point. For the tradition said that Elijah would return before the Messiah came. And, voila! Matthew gives us a First Century reboot of Elijah in the locus-eating Prophet. He's calling the people to repent and calling the high and mighty gawkers who have come out from the temple to see him a "brood of vipers!"

It's possible we could understand that. After all, the leaders who are mocking him are, many of them, considered colluders with the occupying forces of the Roman Empire. The religious leaders had sworn allegiance to the Roman Governor and the Jewish puppet king that Rome placed on the throne in Jerusalem.

John's call, "Prepare the way of the Lord," was another echo of the Prophet Isaiah. But also, he said, "Come, repent and be baptized." That repent word is a loaded one in our culture, isn't it? It's one of those churchy words screamed by street preachers and television evangelists, directing their invective at all the sinners around them, calling to turn or burn. And we can see where they got it from. John sure does seem to be talking about turning or burning here.

What is it he says? "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." There is an ax at the root of the tree. As I was reading that line earlier this week, the news feed on my phone was pinging with the stories from Joshua Tree National Park in California. It's one of the most awe-inspiring desert canvases for the beauty and diversity of creation that I have ever seen. But the government shut-down has brought difficulty to that beautiful place.

After campground toilets were on the verge of overflowing, the few un-furloughed rangers made the difficult decision to briefly close the park. But they didn't have the human capital to enforce that and people cut chains across roads, littered the pristine areas of the

park with their illegal campground waste and, as more than a few photos have shown, cut down precious Joshua Trees to create open spaces to race their off-road vehicles or to drive deeper into the park than vehicles are allowed.

It's enough to make you scream, "you brood of vipers!" at our fellow citizens breaking laws and destroying life, treating creation like it's their personal playground. And just when I was feeling all self-righteous, that other story of the week came out about the most recent carbon emissions data for the United States.

And when all the world, except us it seems, has contracted to lower emissions to help stem the growth and impact of human exacerbated climate change, our carbon emissions as a nation have risen to record levels. Instead of moving toward the reductions called for under the Paris Accords, it's as though the entire nation heard the President's decision to withdraw from those accords and said, "Well if everyone else is going to do whatever they want, why not me?"

And this time I can't scream my John the Baptist invective at some faceless, Neanderthal, off-roading, camper jerk because what am I doing to reduce my carbon footprint, to reduce my impact on God's creation? A little, sure, but not near as much as I know I can, as I know I should. And the word repent has a sting to it now.

Into the midst of all of this walks Jesus, the son of God, the one who is bringing the Kingdom of Heaven near. And he does the oddest thing. This Jesus, who we are taught is without sin, who we are assured has no need of repentance, marches right into the river and says, "Baptize me too." This is confusing – to Matthew's readers and to us as well. I thought this was a story about sinful humanity and our need to straighten up and fly right. But here's Jesus right in the mucky shore of the Jordan saying, "Dunk me too." Why? Maybe that word, 'repentance,' has the key. Repentance, at least the word used here by John, *metanoete* in the Greek, is the plural form of a word that literally means "turn your mind" or "turn your thinking." Does Jesus need to turn his head, turn his mind, turn his thinking? Or is he possibly suggesting a direction to turn it?

Following their noses has led Judea right into the hand of their Roman overlord, into capitulation to oppression and into a "well, everything is awful, so I might as well get what I can get" kind of relationship with the world around them. Leaders scramble for power and relevance forgetting who they serve — an empire that would just as soon slaughter them as protect them.

Jesus wanders into all of this repentance talk and begins a ministry that will be vastly different than John's, so different that in Chapter 11 of Matthew John will send some of his men to inquire, "Are you really the one?" It's because Jesus isn't acting like any prophet before or like the Messiah they are expecting.

The great Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner describes this conflict this way: *Where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness*

with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. ...Where John baptized, Jesus healed."

Today we celebrate our baptismal callings and the new leaders you have called into service for the next three years in this congregation. I want to suggest that our calling is not to be the next John the Baptist, pointing out others' wrongs, endlessly lamenting how utterly screwed up things might be right now in Washington, Springfield, or our own backyard. We are not followers of John. We are followers of the one who wandered right into the middle of John's totally legitimate burn of those who were abusing their power and forgetting they belonged to God. We are following the one who said, "Follow me;" the one for whom the dove brought the Spirit of Life, not unlike the dove proclaiming new life at the end of the Noah story; the one who came up out of the Jordan to place himself on the margins and in the halls of power, placing himself in the midst of the conflicts and problems of the day. He is the one we follow.

It's ironic then, perhaps, that the ones who are being remembered this week, not for their destruction and chaos in Joshua Tree, but for coming into that park, and parks across the land and cleaning up, repairing the breach created by the thoughtlessness of so many. They were not Christians but Muslim youth who publicly said they were responding out of their faith to help bring healing where there was brokenness.

It does raise the question — how are we called to turn our thinking, to turn our minds to the one who is still there on the margins, still there where there is brokenness, to turn our hearts to bring healing? What might that look like? Well on certain things, like our impact on the environment, it probably means we stop waiting for others to do something and get on it, individually and as a community. But what about more generally? How do we respond to our callings to be followers of the one who brings life? How do we turn our thinking away from following our own noses into narcissism land and towards the giver of new life? Maybe we are called to look for footprints in the snow and set aside our well-laid plans.

Just ask Pam Bales. For years Pam has been an avid hiker and mountain climber all across New England. Her passion has turned into a part-time calling for her as years ago she became a member of the all-volunteer Pemegewasset Valley Search and Rescue Team. Through them, she learned about safe hiking and how the most important person she could rescue up on her beloved Presidential Mountains of New Hampshire was herself. She always packs enough gear for whatever may come. She always leaves multiple copies of her solo hiking plans with friends and schedules call-ins.

She had done all of that on October 17, 2010. She was going to climb Mount Washington in October, not the smartest idea many would tell her. But there was supposed to be a window in the fall weather, and it would be her last big hike before winter set in. She prepared extra, every layer of clothing she could possibly need. She planned for one route but had an escape route on all of her plan maps if the weather turned south. The hike that day started under gray skies, but there was little wind and nothing coming down, at least for the first few miles. As she rose higher, more and more it appeared that the threatened bad weather would come in sooner than expected. Several times she stopped to add layers of clothing and gloves from her pack and by the time she reached the end of the first trail, it seemed she would likely have to take that alternate route back and cancel her quest for the summit. She was just a half mile from that turn when it struck

her. She had been following footsteps in the snow almost the entire trip. This was not uncommon as there were lots of good hikers in that area. But now she could see the tracks were fresher and they were not hiking boots but tennis shoes.

She wondered who could be so foolish. Well, surely, they will do what she was planning, to turn back down the mountain at the next cairn marking the alternate trail. But a quarter mile before that turn to the right, the tennis shoes turned off to the left and went off of the trail onto what was known to be a fairly dangerous area of the mountain known as the Great Gulf. It was easy to miss a small cliff in that area, easy to hit a pack of fresh snow that had not yet filled in all the cracks in the rocks underneath and really injure yourself.

Who could be so foolish? Pam asked as the winds whipped around her. She needed to move on, fearful for her fellow hiker. But she had to get down off of this mountain. So, off she marched for just a few feet but then she turned her head back to look — tennis shoes. She had to do it. Getting her bearings, she trudged off into the stinging, rising wind and snow, and a quarter mile later she found him, a man in light fall clothing and tennis shoes almost succumbed to the cold, already suffering hypothermia.

She stripped off his wet frozen clothes and put on clothes from her pack, covering him with stick-on hand warmers and she pulled him, still virtually catatonic to come back with her. It went that way for the next several hours. She sang every song she could think of to keep him distracted. More than once he would stop and sit down, beginning to curl into what would be fatal sleep. But she roused him, cajoled him and pulled him along. As he returned to fully present the lower and warmer they got, he remained silent. He didn't say his name. When they got to the parking lot, he simply got in his car and drove away with no words to her at all. And weeks went by as Pam was still puzzled.

And then came the note, not to her, but to her rescue squad. She had mentioned them many times in their walk down the mountain. The note said: "On Sunday, October 17, I went up my favorite trail....to end my life. Weather was to be bad...I was dressed to go quickly...Next thing I knew, this lady was talking to me....changing my clothes...giving me food....making me warmer...She wouldn't leave me...Got me up and had me stay right behind her...always talking....I wanted only to take my life....but she treated me with care, compassion...the impression that I mattered...I didn't matter to me but to her...." The note went on to say how he was getting help now and how grateful he was.

Pam had turned her head and went into the middle of his chaos and she said, "follow me." And he turned his head and lived.

Who are we called to be — in our baptisms, in the special callings that come our way — but those who stop following the end of our noses, those who will turn off from our well planned paths to seek those who need someone — even us — to point them in the direction of love, of hope, and life, or at least to join us as Christ calls us to turn our heads too and follow.

This is the link to the above story: : https://www.unionleader.com/nh/outdoors/footprints-in-the-snow-lead-to-an-emotional-rescue/article_482a2e0f-e725-5df6-9e7c-5958bdb272e5.html