

“A Second Chance: It’s Not Too Late to Take It!”¹

December 13, 2015

I

Well terror, terror ... all around. It’s in the air, in the papers, on CNN 24/7. We’re bathed in it. So it’s kind of hard to climb up into the pulpit and not acknowledge the evil that stalks us apparently at every turn ... it’s burrowed into our psyches and I, for one, can’t just turn it off.

But when you get right down to it, there’s not much you and I can do about it either. I mean, just keep your eyes open – as they say, if you see something, say something. And ... vote your conscience when you can. And of course pray ... “good Lord, deliver us from evil!”

But that’s about it for you and me. However, having said that ... there may be some forms of evil that we can do something about ... even on a daily basis.

And along those lines, I never miss an opportunity this time of year to call upon W. H. Auden to shed some light on what we’d prefer to keep hidden in the dark of our lives. In Auden’s long poem, “For the Time Being,” he has this wonderful prose section, spoken by the narrator, that goes something like this:

*These are stirring times for the editors of newspapers ...
Mankind is on the march ... even the problems of Trade Cycles ... are regarded by the experts
As practically solved; and the recent restrictions
Upon aliens and free-thinking Jews are beginning
To have a salutary effect upon public morale ... we are fully
Alive to these dangers; we are rapidly arming and both
Will be taken care of in due course ... then, ...
Our great Empire shall be secure for a thousand years.*

But then he writes:

*If we were never alone or always too busy,
Perhaps we might even believe what we know is not true;
But no one is taken in, at least not all of the time;
In our bath, or the subway, or the middle of the night,
We know very well we are not unlucky but evil ...*

So there we are. Evil. Out there. In here. Well ... maybe that’s a bit strong. How about sin. How about ... let’s call it sin. Which then brings me to this morning’s gospel and John the Baptist. Let’s look.

Now all over the world, Christians are celebrating Advent, this season of Preparation for the birth of Christ. And all over Christendom, the first three Sundays are occupied with readings about John the Baptist. But you know, that's kinda jarring! 'Cause here we are, getting ready for the unrestrained joy of angels, tinsel, carols, and the cheery glow of Christmas. And then in comes the Baptist – reeking of locust and honey and who knows what else ... smelling of poverty and desert discipline.

Now, can you imagine sending Christmas cards out to your friends with John's message? Like, "Greetings from our house to yours. Our thoughts of you at this time of the year are best expressed in the words of John the Baptist, 'You brood of vipers!' Merry Christmas!" Oh yeah. Season's Greetings from us to you.

Yet still, all the gospels have John there, at the beginning – as if to say you cannot get to Jesus until you've met John. Like you cannot know why Emmanuel – God with us – why Emmanuel comes – until John tells you why you so desperately need God.

And I think that message is sometimes pretty hard to take! I mean, we say to ourselves and each other, "You know, Christmas brings out the best in us – sort of like Scrooge with a golden heart deep down. And I do think frankly – at least on the surface – you and I do pat ourselves on the back, rejoicing in our goodness. So it's just plain hard to hear John's message.

I mean, what need have good folks like us for the harsh medicine John is trying to pour down our throats? This tough castor oil of repentance? What need have basically good folks like us – what need have we for God to come to Bethlehem to save us, since we are, on the whole, quite capable of saving ourselves?

And maybe we could pull that off ... if it weren't for John yelling in our face, ranting down our church aisle, demanding to cleanse us of our delusions with a cold dip in the icy Jordan.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," cries John. "Good," we say. "At last God has come to give me what I deserve, set me up, treat me right." As you and I deserve.

"Therefore repent," says John. "Say what?" What!?? "Repent, turn around, you brood of vipers!" But then maybe we reassure ourselves, "He's attacking those folks, the street hoodlums, criminals, surely not me." But then John turns to me and yells, "And don't you say, 'We have Abraham as our father!'" "But. But ... my family has always been members of this church. I mean, I tithe!"

OK. Maybe enough of that. You get my point. Or rather, John's point. As Auden says, in the silence of the night, in the deep silence of our lives, we know very well that ... we are sinners. And so just maybe we do need to repent and change some things in the fullness of our time.

Now, don't get me wrong. There is also genuine good in you and me. Occasionally we are unselfish. Once in a while, we do sacrifice our good for another's. We are capable of deep love and we give it. But

we're a mixed bag, aren't we ... of good and bad, of sometimes even downright evil. And while we can't do a lot about international terrorism, we can do something about the evil that resides in our hearts. Oh, it's not easy. But we can uproot some of that, and change our lives in the process.

So let's dig a little deeper.

III

See, if you think about this morning's scene, after John got finished with calling them a brood of vipers and such, those folks standing around in the sand started asking him a most crucial question. "What then should we do?" What shall I do? I mean, they don't ask him what shall I think? That's not going to get you very far. Or what shall I promise? Words are cheap. Or what shall I regret? No, that's easy. They ask instead, what shall I do?

And here you and I stand in the wilderness with John's flock. And he cries, "Repent! Make the rough ways smooth." And so we ask, "What then should we do?" What should I do!

Well, while we're standing here, let's read between the lines a bit. I think one of the rough ways for a lot of folks – one of the key rough ways to be smoothed out for a pathway to God ... is their past. Folks who've done things that were minor to major. Folks like any one of us here, folks like you and me, who maybe can glance back over our shoulder, and glimpse some of the less than gracious things we've done or said. Things that have hurt people. Maybe things that were enormously evil. Spouses betrayed. Dishonesty. Embezzlement. Fraud and lying. Drugs. Addictions. The catalog is as endless as there are people.

And so for some folks, the past is an enormously rough way. And they turn ... like meat on a spit over an open fire, and they roast on it. And so they don't really ever change ... 'cause they're always looking back. And just so in our Bible story this morning these folks with a past came to John. And they ask him that same question over and over. "What are we to do? What should we do?"

But look again at John's answer. At no time does he advise them to review their past, to dwell on their past. No, John's idea was, "Look, here you are, here and now, asking for renewal – hoping to glimpse a future that's better than your past."

And so then John answers them – not with the past – he answers them with their future. So to the tax collectors he says, "From now on, I'm not caring what you did in the past, whatever evil, whatever extortion; but from now on, in the future, here's what you're to do. Do not grab more than what you're supposed to collect." And to the soldiers he says, "No matter how much brutality and pillage and rape you've done in the past; You're asking me, 'what are we to do?' I'll tell you! Look to the future. Do not bully folks and do not punish innocents."

So now picture yourself in line. And you ask, "What then shall I do?" See, that's the question the Baptist confronts you and me with today. Where is it in your life that you need to act your way into right future living? And what steps, what acts specifically do you need to take, one day at a time?

Well, I do think that's for each of us, you and me, to decide by the pull of God's Spirit in your life. See, every one of us here right now, sitting in this building,

everyone of us here has a past – mild, benign, tame, indifferent, horrendous, or just plain bad! Whatever's been in the past, hurt or hate, you name it – you can't undo it ... it's past ... it's over.

But the thing is, you're here! You're sitting here with some need to worship God, to find some answers to your life, with some hunger to hear the good news of hope, and break bread together as a community of faith. To use the days you have left ... to use them for everyday kindness and mercy. To use them for love ... for those small acts of kindness that don't make the headlines. But make your life truly human.

See, finally, I think John is offering you and me a new lease on life. A chance to really start over. Start ... all over. So what's that like? Well, here's a little story to give you a feel for maybe what that's like. It's a story told by Fred Craddock – a well-known preacher who died this past year. It goes something like this.

When Fred was a pastor of a church in Tennessee, there was a little girl of about seven who came to church every Sunday – alone. One of her parents would drive up in their fancy car, up the circular driveway to the church, and drop her off there with her little Bible, and then pick her up after the service. Mom and Dad never came through the doors of that church.

Then one Sunday, Fred looked out from the pulpit and lo and behold, there were Mom and Dad sitting with their daughter. And at that church they had an Altar call later in that service – where folks would come up and repent their sins, and pledge to let the Lord into their lives. And Mom and Dad came up and knelt, with tears in their eyes.

Well, after church Fred had to ask them what had made a difference in their lives that brought them in that Sunday morning. And the Dad said, "Well, you know, we're known for having some pretty wild parties at our house." And Fred said, "Yeah I know." And the Dad said, "Well last night we had a house full of folks. And I guess there was a lot of drinking going on and it got kind of rowdy and noisy. And all the noise brought our daughter down the stairs, and after a little while, she said out loud – she said, "God is great, God is good. Let us thank Him for our food! Night everyone!" And then she scrambled back upstairs."

The Mom said, "Well, all of a sudden, things got real quiet, and then pretty soon, folks started looking at their watches and saying, "Gosh, look at the time. We have to go." So all the guests pretty quickly

cleared out. Well, sir, we started cleaning up and picking up the ashtrays and plates and crumpled napkins and half-empty drinks and taking 'em into the kitchen.

“And after a few minutes of cleaning up, there we were, standing at the sink. And we looked at each other, and standing there at the sink I finally put into words what we were both thinking. And I said, ‘What in the world are we doing with our lives.’ What ... are we doing with our lives.”

A moment of truth. A dawning of recognition. A change of heart. And a turn toward something better.

The gospel ... the good news of hope ... calls you to new life, to start over with right action. John is offering a new beginning – a new start – for you who venture into your wilderness and confront your life there. The Bible calls it a new birth. A second chance. John is offering you and me that second chance. It's not too late to take it.

Amen.

¹ Resources used: William Willimon's Pulpit Resource Classic for December 2015, "Repent, Repent!"; Barbara Brown Taylor's *Home by Another Way*, "Wherever the Way may Lead"; Fred Craddock's *Craddock Stories*; W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being," found in *Collected Longer Poems*, New York: Random House, 1969, p. 163.