

SLD12.05.10 2nd Advent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 3:1-12
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“Reflection and Renewal – Advent Examen”

For those of you who weren't here last week, which was the first Sunday in the season of Advent, I'd like to introduce you to *The Advent Conspiracy* in which some of us here at Emory Church are participating. The “official” *Advent Conspiracy* is an international movement started some four years ago for the purpose of (quote) “restoring the scandal of Christmas by substituting compassion for consumption.” More accurately, *The Advent Conspiracy* might have described itself as substituting Christmas's secular scandal of consumption with Christmas's original sacred scandal of compassion.

The competing tensions between the two scandals are well illustrated by the picture on the front of your bulletins, and by signs around the church.

Some of us here at Emory Church are experimenting with what it means to follow *The Advent Conspiracy's* advice to “Spend Less on material things, Give More in the way of personal presence, Love All God's chillen” by giving beyond our usual giftees, and Worshipping Fully God's scandalous gift of God's Self in a little bitty baby born in a barn 2,000 years ago.

What we explored last week as the importance during Advent of waiting actively, constructively, with alertness and anticipation not only of the coming of the Christ child but of the presence of God's Shalom already in our midst. Henri Nouwen speaks of the importance of waiting for Christ with the belief that God is already at work in the waiting,

trusting that something hidden is, indeed, already happening. Indeed, waiting, as we noted last week, is a classroom in which we learn to trust God.

But what are we supposed to be doing while we're hanging around waiting expectantly for the birth of God into the world? That is, besides getting everything ready for the Big Day. What, exactly, is it our Advent Eyes are supposed to be scanning for?

Still, we need a road map, you and I, some sort of guidelines to plug in to this "something" God seems to be up to. Not that we like anybody telling us what to do but...give us a hint, God!

So, in the person of John the Baptist, God *did* give us a hint. Not a very pleasant one, but a relatively clear one. Through the Baptist's outbursts, God sends us a pretty clear message of what we're meant to be doing in order to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Here these words from **Matthew 3:1-12**

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' ³This 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." "

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe 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.

11 "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. ¹²His 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."

Now some people would call that "overkill." In fact, the beleaguered Pharisees and Sadducees *did* call it "overkill." "You brood of vipers!" Was that really necessary?

But, you know, give it a couple thousand years and the flame of the Baptist's words begins to wane. Having heard his wild-eyed diatribe so many times ourselves, we may tend to accept John as something of a bachelor uncle with a bad temper. Hand him a scotch and water, get him out to the front porch, and everything'll calm down.

Still, tone down the drama, remove the rage, and what's the Baptist really telling people but to change? Change! Change your hearts! Get a grip, get over yourselves and change your hearts!

That's what "metanoia" means, the Greek word used for what the Baptist keeping yelling at people. It's usually translated "repent," and it *does* mean repent, though not in the smarmy, guilty, "gee, I feel bad about that," kind of way we usually think of repent. The Greeks had a word for that, too – "metaMELomai." Feeling remorse. Getting stuck in "the bitter end of sin." "Metanoia" is different. "Metanoia" means breaking free from sin.¹ Sin brings remorse, but God working on ya" brings metanoia, a "divinely effected change of heart that leads you to wholeness, that aligns you with the will and being of God."

See the difference? More than remorse, "metanoia" means *change*. Not change as in "quit doing this and start doing that," although that's what we often boil it down to,

¹ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Kittel and Friedrich, ed., abridged by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985. pp. 591-2.

but “change” as in a change of heart. A shift of being. A breaking out. A breaking through. Sometimes involving a breaking down. It *involves* us, to be sure, but it’s also something God does *to* us.

Derived from two Greek words, *μετά* (*metá*) (meaning "beyond" or "after") and "νοῦς"(noos), meaning "mind," “metanoia” is *beyond* us, beyond what we ourselves can think of to do or fix or alter. It requires our participation but finally, it is done to us.

Only the Baptist keeps insisting that the kid that’s coming is fixin’ to work a “metanoia” on steroids. A radical, root-threatening, metanoia that’ll result in insurgence, revolution, a destabilizing rearrangement of who and how we are. “The axe is lying at the root of the trees; the trees that don’t bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” “You think *I’m* harsh,” says the Baptist. “Ha! The Coming One isn’t messin’ around with water. The Coming One’ll work *his* “metanoia” with fire and the Holy Spirit.” And then, well, look out!

That may *look* like a sweet little baby lying there in the manger, but look out! When that kid grows up, he’s gonna mess with your life in a way that...well, I’m not saying...I’m just saying.

And that messin’ with our lives, friends, is what we’re meant to be preparing for during Advent. That messin’ with our lives is what the Baptist is trying to warn us about. That messin’ with our lives is what Jesus came to do. That messin’ with our lives is what God’s doing under the frenzy of this or any season. That messin’ with our lives is “*metanoia*,” the source of tension between the Seeker and the Shopper, the very fuel for our Advent Conspiracy.

So how, besides being aware of it, anticipating it, being open to it, do you and I participate in this “metanoia,” this transformative change of heart Jesus came to deliver?

Wiser minds than mine have been contemplating this question over the millennia, and we Protestants could do worse than listen to the wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola, 16th founder of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, and a contemporary of Calvin’s (though I doubt they were fond.)

Ignatius was a particularly creative spiritual leader who discerned a remarkable spectrum of practices to guide members of his order on their journeys of faith. And especially here in recent decades, Christians of all stripes have been borrowing and adapting Ignatius’s wisdom.

Now, Ignatius believed that the key to a healthy spirituality was to find God in all things, and to work constantly to gain freedom in your life in order to cooperate with God’s will.² To gain freedom in your life in order to cooperate with God’s will. Metanoia. And one of the few rules of prayer that Ignatius made for his order was his insistence that its members practice twice a day what is called “Examen.”

Now, we’ve heard of “examen” before. Deedra’s led us through it once or twice during a Wednesday night program. Examen is just prayerful reflection on the personal events of our day, looking at ourselves, looking *for* God, and listening for whatever God may have to say to us. What was today like for me? What was I like? Where was God in it? What might God be telling me?

² <http://www.rcdom.org.uk/documents/EXAMEN.pdf>

Examen is basically a method for helping us see God's hand at work in our life. God's hand at work in our "metanoia," the core, transformative shift of being that God works in us over the course of a lifetime. What better way to participate in that work than by examining at the end of each day just what God was up to in us that day? That's Examen. And what people who practice examen regularly find is that, what do you know, they begin see what they're doing that leads to a more profound connection with God, and what aspects of their thinking and behavior create a greater sense of disconnection.³ Helpful information, don't you think?

It's still up to us what to do with that information, but the gift of Examen is paying attention to what God's up to in our own lives.

Now, in this world of mosquitoes and taxes and sore feet, we all know we can't pay attention to what God's up to *all* the time. But remember, we've joined a conspiracy, some of us, just for a few weeks. *An Advent Conspiracy*.

We already know about ourselves that you and I are *both* characters on the bulletin cover. We're all Seekers and we're all Shoppers. But maybe, just for these few weeks of Advent, by practicing Examen once in a while, you and I could give our inner Seeker a leg up to his camel. After all, God is already at work in our waiting; something hidden is already happening. Something quiet but intense, subtle but unstoppable, tender but revolutionary, maybe even dangerous. Our job is simply to alert ourselves to what it is.

To the glory of God. Amen.

³ <http://lifebrook.wordpress.com/2008/05/08/spiritual-practice-the-examen/>

P.S. If you're interested in trying examen, there's an insert in your bulletin explaining one way to go at it.