



Home By Another Way
Matthew 2:1-12 and 3:1-2

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When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. (Exodus 20:18-21)

Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:17-20)

"Having been warned in a dream, they left for their own country by another road." They returned home by another way. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

It may be helpful, today, to remind you that "repent" at its root level, is a simple word. It means "turn."

Last Thursday I was out at Sesquicentennial Park. I was actually there Wednesday, too, meeting some friends at the playground and going on a short hike around the lake. It was a perfect winter day to be outside — and I was so emboldened by this, I returned on Thursday with my dog Annie. I figured we'd go on a slightly longer hike, but still one short enough that I'd be able to get home well before lunch and tend to everything else I'd planned to do that day. I believe that falls under the category of "the best laid plans."

I'd looked at the trail map, and I intended to follow a loop of roughly 3.5 miles. That is not what happened. And it was my fault. I was daydreaming. Lost in my thoughts. Trotting along behind my dog without a care in the world. Which is how 3.5 miles became 8 miles. Because I missed a turn. Because the sign was literally marked with an arrow pointing me in the right direction, and I neglected to follow it.

Now, obviously I am fine. Maybe a blister or two, but otherwise no worse for the wear. When I sat down to write this, though, I couldn't help but laugh. Because really, where's John the Baptist when you need him? There are moments in life when having a boisterous guy in your face proclaiming, "Turn! Hey, yes, you! Turn!" could really help a girl out.

The truth is, I tend to see John the Baptist as a guy who is pretty hard to love. He has become this radical figure, and radical can be hard to embrace. But when I sit down and think about it, that's more because of people today have taken his message of repentance and turned it into something maybe even more radical than he himself ever intended.

The late David Bartlett, who taught preaching at Columbia Seminary, opened my eyes to a new way of understanding John. David said that early in his life as a preacher, he would get himself into trouble with his congregation, because he would reference Albert Schweitzer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mother Teresa and others just like them, all the time. His congregants grew weary. "Aren't there faithful Christians who aren't saints and heroes?" they would ask him. "Can't we hear about people who are a little bit more like us? Isn't it possible to be faithful and obedient while still being more or less ... ordinary?"

Those honest (and understandable) questions from his congregation helped expand the way David thought about John. Because yes. John the Baptist's hair might be wild and his eyes might be a even wilder still, and he asks us to Repent and change our ways ... or else. But also notice this: later in the gospels, when the fairly affluent ask him what they should do to serve God, he doesn't say, "Give up everything." He says, "Share — whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." When tax collectors ask him what they should do, he doesn't say, "Quit your job, because you work for a system that exploits people." He says, "Do your job in a way that protects people — do not allow yourself to profit at someone else's expense." When soldiers ask John what they should do to be faithful, he doesn't say, "Lay down your weapons and become complete and total pacifists." He says, "Do not use your power in inappropriately threatening ways, and do not use your authority to cause trouble for others." None of he says is easy — but none of it is impossible, either.¹

The point of the Gospel is not to make us throw up our arms in frustration, believing that we'll never measure up, so we might as well give up. That has never been the point of the Gospel. The point of the Gospel has always been to point us in the right direction. To point us toward God. To help us better see God and hear God and trust God. And God does not set us up to fail. God asks a lot of us, but God never actually asks more than we are able to do, and God never gives up when it takes us a little while to get it right.

God never gives up on us, and at the very same time, God hopes and prays and maybe even expects that we won't give up, either. It is very easy to fall into an "all or nothing" mentality. But that is exactly what John the Baptist preaches against, and on this New Year's Day, I believe that is worth paying attention to. We are probably not going to bring an end to all war, everywhere. But maybe we can find peaceful solutions some of the time. We are probably not going to end up with universal healthcare. But maybe we can limit policies that prey upon the most vulnerable. We are probably not going to pass gun legislation that protects all our children all the time. But maybe we can take incremental steps in that direction. We are probably not going to eradicate racism. But maybe we can keep examining our own behaviors and tendencies. We are probably not going to come to complete agreement across the political aisle. But maybe we can remember to seek out the humanity in one another. John the Baptist is clear. We are called to work on interim solutions even when a complete solution seems so very far away.

I mentioned to you before that before seminary, I taught Outdoor Education in the mountains of California. One of the classes we taught was Orienteering, a way of finding your way using maps and compasses. Given that I began this sermon with a story about missing a turn on a well-marked hike, it may relieve you to know that when that class showed up on my teaching schedule, I always made sure to team-teach with another instructor. They would take the lead on orienteering, and I would take the lead on something else, something I actually understood. But what I do remember a few things about orienteering. And one is this: If I'm meant to walk in exactly this direction [pointing straight ahead], but I'm off by even just a few degrees on my compass, and I head off in this direction [pointing just a few degrees over from the original direction], initially, it's not that far off the mark. Initially, it doesn't make that much of a difference. But

if I continue in this direction for five hours or five days or five months, over time, that small, almost imperceptible change in direction means I eventually end up in a dramatically different place.

When it comes to orienteering, that's bad news. When it comes to John the Baptist and his message of repentance, that becomes really good news. It means there is always something we can do, no matter how small, and doing that something, is faithful.

Now here's the thing about the Gospel — what's true for our shared lives is true for our individual lives, too. And it is New Year's Day, which means that if you live in the world at all, you have heard in surround sound by now that this is the moment to make a change. To set resolutions. To shift who you are toward who you want to be. To leave the old behind and embrace the new. I'd like to give this idea a giant gospel asterisk. Because, yes. This is as good a time as any to examine our lives and our living. And John the Baptist says, "Repent," because there are places we all need to change. But if you're going to repent, repent the way John intended, not the way the world has re-branded his message.

Who you are is a child of God. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Nothing can change that, and I hope and pray you will never try to change that. God knew what God was doing when God made you. Don't ever forget that. And please don't ever disrespect God by disrespecting the person God made you to be. Because there's a difference between who we are and how we live. John's message is about changing the way we live, not about changing who we are. Changing the way we live can be holy and good. Believing we need to change who we are, is not.

So if there is something about the way you are living that you want to change — if it is a change that will lead you closer to God's own heart — then pursue it in the spirit of John the Baptist, avoiding that "all or nothing" thinking and honoring the significant difference that can come from even the most incremental shift. That is not the only way to approach the New Year, of course, but it might be the way that most needs to be heard this morning.

That's part of why we have started giving out Star Words here on Epiphany Sunday. It's a modern day tradition that honors an ancient story — the story of the magi, who followed a star to the Christ child, and then who went home by another way — changing course, altering the way they moved through the world.

You'll receive a star word during communion — a gift to you given as freely as the bread and the cup we share at this table. Our magi will give it to you, because a star word is not a word you choose for yourself. It is a word bestowed upon you, a word that might be a word you couldn't even imagine for yourself. Every word is positive, and has the capacity to expand the way you see and understand God at work in the world. I can't tell you exactly how you might see your word come to bear throughout the year, but I can remind you that when we go look for something, we are much more likely to find it. Now, I am asked every year by at least a few folks, "Can I trade my word?" No. You can't give your word back. You can get a second word, if you wish. I'll have extras with me outside after worship. We are not without grace here — we will happily give you another. But we'll ask that you keep the original, because none of us ought to be in the business of saying how or when God might choose to be known and seen in the world and in your life.

It is the start of a new year. But the God we serve is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The star we follow was cast into the universe when creation began. And it has been lighting our way ever since. So repent, with gentleness and compassion and trust in the future. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has draw near to you.

¹ These insights from David Bartlett are captured in his sermon "Bringing Our Lives to Light," preached December 16, 2012, at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. It is included in *The Collected Sermons of David Bartlett*.