

Just You Wait...
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
January 11, 2015

Matthew 3:1-17

"Just you wait 'til your father gets home!"

When she was at the end of her rope, that was the threat my Mom used to correct the behavior of my brother Michael and me. After a time, her words didn't quite do the trick, so instead she would say, "Your father will be home any minute." This was a little better, but nothing would call us to attention (and on some occasions – repentance) like the words, "Your father's truck is pulling into the driveway!"

Bingo! This was the magic phrase that produced an instant change in our behavior. It even worked when we used it on each other, "Here comes Dad," one of us would say and no matter how many times we cried "wolf", these words always drew at least a side-glance out the window.

You might say Mom could put "the fear of dad" in us. Not a toxic, unnerving fear, mind you but a healthy, respectful fear. Dad loved us and we knew it. We felt safe and secure surrounded by his strength. He was firm, and was often the parent who held us accountable for our behaviors with a stern, no-nonsense lecture. Even now, when I am struggling through something and I feel stuck, I go to him for his 'cut to the chase' advice.

In our scripture today, John the Baptist appears on the scene with a stern message. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John's preaching would qualify as being of the "fire and brimstone" variety. His message was a kind of equivalent to, "*Your father is pulling into the driveway!*"

And it struck a nerve, a strong one with the people. Even the religious leaders, the temple elite, came out to hear him -- *and* responded to his message. These days, I'm not sure John's movement would have a chance... how would it be if I stood up this morning to greet you with a "Welcome to church, you brood of vipers"?

Would you bring your friends to worship or tell your neighbors about MCC if that's how you knew you'd be greeted? Not a great tagline if we want our church to grow and continue its vital ministries upon the historic Monroe Green.

John certainly was a strange figure. His camel skin clothes, his diet of locusts and wild honey would cause most people today to give him a wide berth and puzzled looks. But to his first century followers, he was strange in the sense of 'mysterious'. He lived an austere existence in the Judean desert wilderness and issued an absolutely uncompromising call to "shape up or ship out".

John crashed onto the religious scene like an earsplitting clap of thunder. The 400 years of prophetic silence was over. John's unyielding call to holy living extended to everyone he encountered -- including Herod whom he chastised for marrying his brother's wife. *That* move cost John his life, but that's a story for another day. [Mark 6:20].

But more amazing than John's strangeness was the strength of his ministry. It was at least a twenty mile journey from the city to the place he was baptizing -- at best the trip was a difficult donkey or camel ride up and down shifting sand dunes. It wasn't just the common people who sought him out for his baptism of repentance, but the Pharisees and Sadducees came too -- and those guys never agreed on anything! [Acts 23:6]

The message John proclaimed was twofold.... First, "You need to have a change of heart and be sorry for your sins because the time when God will take charge of all things is upon us!" and second...."Let your actions reflect the genuineness of your change of heart." In other words -- "Let your walk match your talk."

The word "repent" means literally, "change your mind". It also included the idea of being "sorry" for your actions -- or "having a change of heart." Not a mere intellectual change of mind... but a radical transformation of your entire being, a fundamental turnaround which results in living a changed life, closer to God, in harmony with your neighbors.

So, that's all well and good. Repentance is important! It's hard to make positive changes in our lives if we don't first evaluate the things we've done wrong. Preaching judgment is the easy part. John calls out those things that stand in the way of our faithful living. He blusters. He yells. He spits out his judgment and remains in the wilderness, far removed from the everyday lives of those who are streaming to him.

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry. In that day and age, to be baptized by someone meant that you were their follower. The gospel writers are careful to record John saying to the crowd before Jesus gets there that one is coming who is greater than he. And when Jesus comes to John at the Jordan river, the gospel of Matthew records some conversation between them, an argument almost.

The thorny theological question that lies beneath the exchange for me is this... if John was baptizing for forgiveness of sins, what did sin did Jesus have to repent?

Maybe John's baptism meant something entirely different for Jesus. If he was to become the one who enters into the heart of human life, standing with humanity, taking on all those things that separate us from God, maybe he needed to get dirty with us. By stepping into muddy waters that thousands of other people have washed in, he stands in the gap between our inner life and external behavior.

For Jesus, his work could have been led by his own self-righteousness at "letting those sinners have it", but instead he enters the lives of those who are the most broken down in society. Later, at the cross, that cloud of sin and separation and self-righteousness will be burned off like the morning dew.

Many of you have heard me talk about our church camp, Silver Lake conference center in Sharon, CT which runs week-long conferences every summer for young people aged from 4th to 12th grade. For some of these kids, summer camp is the only opportunity they have to talk about deeply spiritual things. Maybe they aren't connected to a church, or they used to go before the weekend schedule became too intense. Whatever the reason may be, most of the kids who come to Silver Lake are seeking something deeper at God Camp.

So we try to set them up to have “watershed moments”, activities and discussions to get them thinking about their faith. It may be the only chance they get all year to contemplate the love of God, self and neighbor that is the heartbeat of our faith. And we hope that the week is wonderful enough that they not only come back the following year, but make connections when they get home to their local church.

A few years ago, Cynthia Robinson and I were deaning a week of sacred clowning for middle schoolers. Through Bible studies, art projects and drama workshops, each camper developed a clown persona, complete with name and personality. Let me tell you, we had an incredible time with those jokers! At the end of the week, the waterfront staff let us have a water carnival. At the water carnival, we had a group remembrance of our baptisms. After some prayers and a naming ceremony, we ran into the water together, holding hands, in full make-up, red noses and all!

What better way for us to remember that in the waters of baptism, God loves us and claims us as God’s very own. And I hope that the feeling we had on that sunny day stayed with the campers when times got difficult for them. I hope that they recalled the love of God and sought that out in a safe place.

It will never NOT be true that we are a beloved child of God... that is the point of Jesus’ baptism, and by extension, ours. It leaves a watermark for the rest of our lives, wherever we may travel and whatever experiences we may have. In this church, is the most profound thing we do in community, it’s real and it is who we are.

Let’s close this time with prayer... *God of love, you yearn for us to turn to you and live. Even when we judge others or ourselves and stubbornly focus on sin's power, you burn away our resistance and set us on a journey of hope. Open up our hearts and snuggle up to our fear and pain. Burn away all that keeps us from loving you and one another. Stir up our hearts, O Lord, Amen.*