

**The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: January 7, 2018**

**The Baptism of our Lord: Mark 1: 4-11**

*Repentance Is Something God Does For Us.*

**Preached**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**A priest was about to baptize a young child. He approached the father of the child and said solemnly, “My son, Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared for it?” “I think so,” the young father replied. “My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for all of our guests.” “I don’t mean that,” the priest responded. “I mean, are you prepared spiritually?” “Oh, sure, Father” came the reply. “I’ve got a keg of beer and a case of whiskey.” I’m not quite sure this is what the priest had in mind when he asked the young man if he was spiritually prepared.**

**Today we are celebrating the baptism of our Lord. You know the story. A man named John was baptizing people out in the wilderness in the Jordan River, which means he was several miles outside of Jerusalem. This is interesting because the Gospel of Mark tells us that “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.” Obviously John**

was a remarkable preacher. He appealed to a large section of the population, so much so, that many of them walked for many miles to be touched by his ministry. It is also interesting that John's preaching was of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This was highly unusual for Jews. Jews believed that only Gentile converts to Judaism needed to be baptized.

According to the customs of the day, these Gentile converts had to do 3 things: First, if the convert was a male, he had to be circumcised. This was the defining mark of a Jew. Second, a sacrifice made in the temple had to be offered as a payment for his sins. Third, the convert had to be baptized. This was literally a full bath in which the whole body was bathed. This ritual symbolized a cleansing from all the pollution of sin in his life, so that he might start a new relationship with God. No such ritual was required of Jews, however. Still, people, mostly Jews, poured out from Jerusalem and the surrounding territory to be baptized by John.

My dearest sisters and brothers, could it be that the people of that area were becoming aware of their sin and their need for repentance? I suspect most people today would never admit that each of us stands in need of repentance. I doubt that most people today even know what repentance really means.

Repentance is a change of direction. The word 'repentance' comes from the

**ancient Greek word “metanoia” which translates to a turning around, a turning of our face away from sin and towards God.**

**It is unusual that a preacher could make an entire region of people so aware of their need for repentance and baptism as John did. Maybe people came at first out of curiosity. John the Baptist, of course, was interesting for many reasons, not the least of which was his appearance and his lifestyle. Mark tells us he wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. His was a Spartan life out in the wilderness, but there is no questioning his appeal to those who were searching for some spiritual assurance.**

**John’s ministry was also interesting because of his message: *He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”***

**John’s ministry was designed to help people prepare spiritually for the coming of Jesus the Christ. If you think about it , this is the purpose for which the Rite of Baptism is still administered today. When parents present their children for baptism, they are preparing them for a lifetime of spiritual**

**growth. When a young person or an adult comes for baptism, we hope they understand that this is not the end of the process; it is but the beginning.**

**My sisters and brothers, educators today think in terms of life-long learning. So it is with our spiritual life following Jesus. Baptism isn't the end of that process; it is just beginning. People come to present their children or themselves for baptism for a variety of reasons. Christians believe that we are brought into the church and into a lifetime of discipleship in Jesus Christ through the waters of Baptism.**

**At every Baptism, we the church, along with the parents and God parents renew our Baptismal Covenant together. Repentance is an integral and necessary part of the Baptismal Rite. My sisters and brothers how can you and I open our hearts to the love of Christ if we are still holding on to destructive emotions and practices? How can we follow Jesus and live our lives with no regard to the effect we have on others?**

**A seven-year-old girl once told her parents that she had to see her parish priest. They asked her why. All she would say was, "Something is wrong, but I can only tell Father. Every day for two weeks she persisted. "I have to see Father." Finally the parents brought her to the priest's office and the girl poured out her concerns. "My brain is broken," she told the priest with great**

sincerity. “You know that thing in your head,” she said, “that keeps your thoughts from coming out your mouth? Well, it doesn’t work for me.

Whenever I think something bad, I just say it. Then I feel so bad because I don’t want to hurt people. My sisters and brothers, I don’t believe we have broken brains. I believe our mouth overrides our brain and we say things that hurt others. Who hasn’t said things they’ve regretted? Who hasn’t done things they later regretted as well? I sure do and when I think about those times my big mouth overrides my small brain it always makes me wince with regret. If

If there is only one thing you remember from this sermon please remember this: Repentance isn’t something that we do for God. Repentance is something God does for us. Our repentance does nothing to enhance God’s life. The primary Sacraments of Baptism, Holy Communion and repentance is entirely for our benefit.

In her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris writes about a little boy who wrote a poem called, “The Monster Who Was Sorry.” In the poem the boy explodes about how he hated it when his father yelled at him. In anger he threw his sister down the stairs, wrecked his room, and then destroyed an the house. His poem concludes: “Then I sit in my messy house

and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’” Commenting on the boy’s poem, Norris writes, “‘My messy house’ says it all, with more honesty than most adults could have mustered. The boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in a fourth century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?”

My brothers and sisters, some of us have messy rooms in the house of our lives. Those messy rooms mar our peace of mind. Those messy rooms in the house of our lives endanger our marriages. Those messy rooms in the house of our lives alienate us from our neighbors and from God. Those messy rooms in the house of our lives load us with guilt. Those messy rooms in the house of our lives fill us with the fear of being found out. Those messy rooms in the house of our lives bog us down with depression. In other words, my sisters and brothers, we are unable to be what we know God wants us to be. So, why put up with all that? Why not repent of our waywardness before it is too late?

Like garbage, the effects of sinful habits have a way of accumulating beyond our plans and beyond our control. Who wants to live with debris in your back

**yard or in your heart? Of course the worse thing about sin is what it does to our relationship with God and one another.**

**A filthy dirty little boy came in from playing in the yard and asked his mother, “Who am I?” Ready to play the game she said, “I don’t know! Who are you?” “WOW!” cried the little boy. “Mrs. Johnson was right! She said I was so dirty, my own mother wouldn’t recognize me!” My brothers and sisters, just ask yourself, is there so much debris in your life that even God no longer recognizes you?**

**I knew a man who abandoned his wife and small children in order to take up with another woman. When I confronted the man, he replied, “Right now, I’m happy, Fr. John, and I don’t want to give this up. I know it’s wrong, but I don’t care. If that means I’ll burn in hell, then I guess I’ll burn in hell.” Even many years later, those words still send a chill down my spine. I was looking at a man who professed to be a Christian who had knowingly chosen illicit sex over God’s way. And this man felt no regret. I have no idea where that man is now, and whether or not he has ever realized the consequences of his actions on his wife and children. This man was seriously in danger of losing his soul, losing his relationship with the source of his being, losing everything that was decent in his life.**

**That's why repentance is so important in our lives. Our lives can careen treacherously out of control to the point that God no longer sees God's image in our souls. Because God loves and cares for us so much, God comes to us and offers God's grace and God's love and God's forgiveness, as well as, God's help in changing our life's direction, but only we can make the final decision. John came offering a baptism of repentance. Interestingly enough, Jesus came the same way. Why? Because repentance is to our benefit. It is not something we do for God; it is something God does for us. Please my sisters and brothers, listen to God's voice deep down in your soul calling you. Hear God's invitation today? Come home to the Lord, repent and begin your new life today. AMEN.**