



The New England Church Pulpit

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REORIENTING OUR FAITH COMPASS

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Matthew 3.1-10

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

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

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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have our good deeds and our religious heritage to rely on. Even now the ax 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.'"

The late Ken Murray, church member extraordinaire, was as gifted a gardener as he was an engaging personality. One of his specialties was the nurture and care of orchids, which bloomed year round in the kitchen bay window of his and Bee's house. It inspired me to buy several only to find out that they were nearly impossible to resurrect once they had finished blooming. The naked stem sticking out of the pot was less than beautiful and I was going to throw it out. But Ken asked me to bring the seemingly dead plants to his house where he worked his magic to bring them back to full bloom. Plant whisperer that he was, he saw in that stem what I could not see.

Immediately following the nativity story in Matthew's gospel, John the baptizer bursts on the scene as a rough and tumble proclaimer of what is ultimately good news for discarded souls and those who tend them. It is easy to dismiss John as some sort of wild man, this ascetic, a seemingly deranged, and scruffy dude who wore weird clothes and had an even weirder diet. He certainly doesn't fit the description of the nice folks that make up congenial society. Like so many people of our knowing, John is subjected to our prejudices about what a normal, nice, productive, law-abiding citizen should look like. We want blooming orchids in the people around us, not this crazy guy shouting at us.

But John is, indeed, like one of those flowerless orchid stems whose bones hold deep in the marrow of his being the essence of new life, of good news, of both hope and retribution. His message is one of repentance, which is less about contrite, humble spirits than it is about reorienting our moral and spiritual compass. Sin is about missing the mark; about going in the wrong direction of our spiritual compass; about acting contrary to our role as co-creators with God. Repentance, then, is about reorienting the compass, about turning it in a direction that leads to life and moving forward.

My dad, outdoorsman that he was, taught me about the use and respect for a compass. In the thick woods of northern Michigan his instruction was to trust the compass to lead you in the right direction; it will always be correct. Your own sense of direction is faulty, often causing you to walk around in circles. This is the metaphor John uses. Reorient your spiritual compass so it can point the direction to meaningful, purposeful living. Repentance is not so much about asking God's forgiveness as it is about the joy of living when we reorient ourselves when we miss the mark.

God's judgment, according to John in this passage, is a judgment upon those who go in the wrong direction, who bring judgment upon themselves. These are the people with no integrity; those who would rather take advantage of someone when they're down than help them get up; those who would rather feed their prejudices than take the more difficult pathway of befriending those whom our prejudices would like to discard, like flowerless orchid vines. When we live this way, we are the brood of vipers of which John speaks. He challenges us to produce fruit worthy of the divine instincts in our human souls.

As you know, a compass can point in the wrong direction if it is too close to a magnet; that metal will pull the north-pointing needle off kilter. Fear does the same thing to our moral compass. Fear of those different from ourselves; fear of an unknown future; fear of death; fear of separation will often send us in circles. Fear tends not to trust. Anxiety is the magnet that skews trust. When fear informs our spiritual compass, we tend to evaluate life based only on what we see with our human eyes; taking us off course as people of faith.

A story from the playbook of our gifted 20-year-old who perished in the fire at college a few weeks ago is illustrative of John's words. Alex Kierstead was a talented musician and a first-rate humanitarian all rolled up into one young man who was savvy beyond his years. One day he met a very scruffy, shabbily-dressed, disheveled and seemingly homeless man who caught Alex's eye as well as his heart. In talking with the man, Alex learned that he was a musician; and, indeed, was not homeless, as most who met him assumed. The man invited Alex to his house where there were many instruments. As they jammed with their guitars, a friendship was born. Many of Alex's friends thought it odd that anyone would befriend such a soul, but Alex had a keen sense of things, seeing beyond the shabby; to see a human being, who was a musician to boot. Here was a young man with a moral compass oriented in the right direction.

People of faith, who are making an effort to travel in the right direction, come to Advent and Christmas as an opportunity to once again reorient ourselves to seeing with the heart, not just the eyes. Here we are reminded again of the need to hone our skills in nurturing what would look like empty lives rather than the potential that is deep in their soul. We function differently than governments and civil systems; we are often at odds with a society that is hell-bent on making money and vying for power. We are countercultural in the sense that we value the people God values, including the refugee, the homeless, the elderly, the sick, those who follow a different religion, those of varying sexual orientations, and the displaced. Society creates margins for these people to live in; we live with one foot in the margins and one foot in the mainstream to provide for them a bridge by which they can find new life.

The message of Advent and Christmas is that we are not god; that there is something larger than ourselves that orders this universe. We read our bibles for wisdom and counsel, for knowledge, for poetry and stories and myth, but we also read it intentionally to remind us to stop thinking and acting like a god.

John's reference to the brood of vipers reminds us that living into God's world begins with a deep understanding of our own limitations, as Calvin Chinn reminds us. "An irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself. As a result, an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself—ordinary people, prisoners, people with less than full function of their limbs, or their minds, people who are deemed unworthy of anything, but discarded like naked, lifeless orchid stems. (*Christian Century*, November 9, 2016)

Ken Murray could look at a dry, barren stem sticking out of a pot and see a flower in the making. I could not see a flower in the least; Ken had the eyes of a trained gardener to see what was near at hand if not here in its fullness. John the baptizer proclaims that the world as God would have it is near....not here, but near. We are challenged to be part of the "near." Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We come on this third Sunday of Advent, God of life, to light the candles that remind us that light has come into our dark world. We pray you to enter our lives today to enlighten our minds and hearts as we live into the hope and joy of Christmas. Give us not the perfect Christmas we want, or one reduced to sentimentality, but the kind we need to uplift our hearts and give foundation to our souls.

We live with a sense of being lost and overwhelmed in the large world with all its problems; remind us of the providence that marks a sparrow's fall.

We live with a shrinking sense of personal worth; remind us of a love that values each person.

We live with a sense of the years going by too quickly; remind us of the abiding purposes in which all that comes to pass is part of the eternal.

We live with a sense of wrong committed and good undone; remind us that divine love is larger than our faults, our sins, and our failures.

We live with a sense of angst, fearing that our future may not be secure, that the bottom may fall out from underneath us; that our lives are spinning out of control; remind us of your peace, your presence, and your power to sustain.

Realizing that we cannot save ourselves from the perils of the world or from the destructive forces of life, we come in this Advent season to welcome your presence anew that we may find in you all that we cannot do for ourselves. Give us strength to conquer hopeless brooding. Fill us with a more complete trust that your presence beyond us ennobles us. Give us what we need to be at peace with all humankind, gracious in temperament, generous in judgment, kind in word and deed, quick to sense the needs of others, and ready to lend a helping hand and a loving spirit wherever it may be needed.

May this Advent season be a journey of hope amid hopelessness; of mindful celebration amid the dark days of our souls; of generosity and peace toward all. In the name of the one whose birth we celebrate, Amen.