

A Haiku Advent: Repent  
Matthew 3:1-12  
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For those of you who missed the festivities last Sunday, a brief review is in order before getting to the heart of the matter. We have arrived at the second Sunday of the season of Advent, and thus, to week two of our Haiku Advent, during which we will be taking as our point of departure the following haiku, written in the form of a hypothetical Microsoft computer error message:

Chaos reigns within  
Reflect, repent, and reboot  
Order shall return

This may look familiar to you if you have ever unexpectedly lost data, or received an email from my personal email account, in which it is not only my signature file at the end of every message, but a humbling reminder of the relationship between Creator and Creature. In particular, this Advent we are looking at the human responses to chaos, reflect, repent, and reboot, as we await the return of order: the coming of Christ we will celebrate on Christmas Eve.

Last Sunday we looked at the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew to reflect some on the fact that Advent focuses us on not just the first coming of Christ in the manger, but the second coming as well, on clouds, and in glory, and what we are to do in between those arrivals: to live with an alert inactivity, with active attentive waiting, paying attention to the signs of the end of the age, but not losing ourselves

in them. Such is the nature of “reflect.” Tonight we turn to the response of “repent,” and to help us wrap our minds around that idea, we turn to the third chapter of Matthew, to hear again the story of John the Baptist: (Read Scripture)

So, what would a haiku based on Matthew 3 look like? Well, try this one on as perhaps a summary of the whole passage:

Tree ax wheat chaff fire  
No punctuation needed  
Just repent right now

Imagine for a moment if I began each Sunday’s worship service not with, “Good Evening Church!” but with “Repent Church, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!” How would that be for getting things started? Would that change the tone of things around here? Considering that the word “repent” in the Greek of the New Testament, really means to change one’s mind, and that in Hebrew it means to turn around, that is probably what many people would do: change their mind about coming, turn around and walk right out the door! Repentance is not a very popular activity among the options for the Christmas season, or at any time for that matter. To raise repentance is to suggest sin, and nobody likes to talk about sin, unless it is someone else’s. You see, without sin, there is no need for repentance, no need to change either our mind, or the course of the path we are on. The Roman philosopher Seneca put it well when he said, “Other men’s sins are before our eyes; our own are behind our backs.” It is far easier to point out the sins of others than to recognize our own, and far easier to recognize our own sins than

to repent of them. All the more reason to hear each Advent the words of John the Baptist about the need for repentance.

Well, I don't know about these days, but making repentance the first word certainly worked for John the Baptist. That is how he enters the story, in full bore, preaching the need for repentance. And the people responded. In droves, apparently. It kind of makes you wonder what people thought they were repenting of, what sins they were confessing, that weren't being covered by the usual means on the annual Day of Atonement. It may be that those who first responded to John's message had a more fearful, or apocalyptic, sense of the moment. Perhaps they were the types who worry about things like the end of the age, predictions of the day and the hour of the rapture, who will be taken, and who will be left behind. Perhaps these were in a hurry to confess and put their affairs in order for their upcoming meeting with the heavenly judge, or the king of this "Kingdom of Heaven" John was announcing, hoping to be found worthy.

But for whatever reason they came, these "people from Jerusalem and all Judea," as Matthew describes them, seem to be the sort of people who intuitively "get" the message John is bringing. They don't seem to have any hang-ups about responding to a message that points up their shortcomings, nor to do so publicly. This was no cloistered confessional. I doubt John had a tent out there in the desert with a sign that said, "Confidential Confessions." No, those who came to John the Baptist to confess their sins did so under the gaze of everyone else who was there,

which I suppose might have been some small comfort, knowing that everyone was there for the same reason. The humility with which those who came for baptism is a far cry from that of the Pharisees and the Sadducees a little later in the story, those who come to inspect the scene, once it is clear that people are indeed responding to John. The version of the Bible I read tonight, the NRSV, seems to suggest that Pharisees and the Sadducees also came to be baptized; it says they were “coming for baptism.” But apparently the more accurate translation for “coming for baptism” is actually “coming to where he was baptizing,” a considerable difference indeed. That the latter translation is more accurate is supported by John’s rather lengthy challenge to them, a challenge he does not give to the regular crowds, *and* that Matthew does not tell us that after the scolding, they repent and that John goes ahead and dunks them too. No, he knows they are just there to check him out, so they get the tongue lashing, but not the water, and we can assume that they turned around, not in repentance, but to head back toward town, unchanged in their own minds that the guy was a nut, a threat, or both.

As we heard, John has a lot to say to them but perhaps nothing more important than his simple command, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance,” and of all the things he said, “You brood of vipers” included, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance” may be the hardest words to hear. You see, as public an act as was the confession of sin to receive John’s baptism, just so public must be the evidence of repentance, a witness that you really have changed your mind, that you really have

turned around. People will see in you, or at least people *should* see in you, someone living differently as a result of the change of mind involved in repentance. The rest of the Gospel will describe how they should live differently, what “fruit worthy of repentance” looks and tastes like, for Jesus’ message is no different in this respect: they are to have a righteousness that exceeds the requirements; to practice their piety for God’s sake, not for the praise they receive; to pray with the humility their repentance implies, “Your Kingdom come, your will be done.” For those accustomed to being the ones deciding who should be doing the repenting, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the upper classes of Jewish religious life, this was indeed a harsh challenge. It is no wonder John ended up with his head on a silver platter, preaching, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.”

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It can be hard to contemplate our own need for repentance during Advent, this sweet season of preparing for Jesus. But it may be that there is no better time to repent than during Advent, if our Advent has us stuck in a rut. You see, it was a centuries long rut in which God’s people had found themselves, faithfully awaiting the Messiah to be sure, but slowly and carefully refining their religious laws and practices, only to lose their handle on the reasons behind those laws and practices, namely the mercy, grace, and justice of their God. They spent their time not in

bearing fruit worthy of repentance but in combing their religious pedigrees, relying on the faith of previous generations to assure their standing in the kingdom. They spent so much time and energy getting ready for the party, that they missed it completely. Is our rut much different? We are faithfully awaiting the Messiah yet again this year, but are we spending that time waiting expectantly, reflecting, bearing the fruit of repentance, or are we refining our list of acceptable hymns for the season? Are we trying to be truer to the holiday traditions of our parents and grandparents than to John's calls to righteousness? Are we getting everything perfect for Christmas morning, and missing the meaning of the birth of Christ himself?

In a sense, what the Pharisees and Sadducees are being condemned for is being unwilling to be surprised or challenged by God. They think they know it all, that they are the authors of their own story, that the only authorized version of the truth runs through them and their editorial committee. There's only one way to do God and that way is our way, the way we've always done it. John the Baptist is the perfect counterpoint to their methodical approach, bursting impulsively onto the scene. Are we willing to listen to John? To be challenged by him? To be surprised by God? This Advent, how will you change your mind? How will you turn around? Will you write a haiku?

Chaos reigns within.  
Reflect, repent, and reboot.  
Order shall return. Amen.