Sunday, December 10, 1995
CLAIMING YOUR HERITAGE
Matthew 3:1-12

No one, as John Heineman has pointed out, appreciates having their heritage of faith and the way of practicing that faith called into question. It's difficult for us to have our way of seeing and doing things challenged, especially when there's a long history behind them. Being open and considering new ideas is painful for most of us. This is especially true when it comes to our ways of understanding God, God's creation, and how God relates to us.

I have mentioned in sermons several times that when Galileo showed his new telescope to the leading thinkers of his time and asked them to look through it, suggesting that not everything in the planetary system revolves around the earth, but rather that all the known planets revolve around the sun — thus making the sun the center of our solar system, not the earth — the people he asked to look through the telescope fell into three groups. First, there were those who refused to look at all — they were satisfied with their present understanding of the universe. After all, even the church taught that the earth was the center of all creation. The second group looked into the telescope but refused to believe what they saw. They claimed it was some kind of conspiracy — that Galileo had pasted something on the end of the telescope. The third group accepted the invitation to look into the telescope and at least reconsider their understanding of the universe. Which group would you have been in?

John the Baptist was a kind of Galileo in his time. When he called upon people to "repent," he was asking them to reconsider, to be open to changing their ideas about God and how God works in the world. He wasn't asking his listeners to throw out their religious heritage but to be open to understanding it in a different way. He wasn't saying that their past was wrong — John himself was a part of that tradition — but that God continues to enter the world and our individual lives in fresh and surprising ways if we're open to them.

What's the background of John the Baptist? His parents were named Elizabeth and Zechariah. According to tradition, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. For some unknown reason, Elizabeth and Zechariah had been unable to have children and were now beyond childbearing age.

One day, when Zechariah was serving his regular assigned shift in the temple and it was his task to burn the incense, he had a vision. In the vision, he was told that he and his wife's prayers had been answered. Elizabeth would bear a son, and they were to name him John. The vision also told Zechariah that when this child became an adult, he would be an important "preparer of the way" for the Messiah.

Zechariah found this difficult to believe. His wife was beyond childbearing age.

In the meantime, Mary had also been visited by a messenger of God and was told that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Savior and that her cousin Elizabeth was already pregnant and that her child would be an important forerunner for the ministry of Jesus.

As Elizabeth's and Zechariah's son was growing up, it was obvious that the child was deeply religious. He seemed to sense that God had a special mission for him in life. We don't know anything else about John's childhood. We can assume that as he was maturing, he gained a

deep appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of his own religious tradition. In the gospel stories, we next meet him as an outspoken and dynamic prophet.

The central theme of John the Baptist's preaching was, "Be prepared. Get ready. God is coming among us in a new way. Repent. Be baptized as a sign that your life is turning in a new direction."

This was a difficult and even insulting message to many of the people in his tradition. They prided themselves on their religious heritage, and many seemed to believe that because they were born into that religious tradition, that was all that was needed.

"Not true," said John the Baptist. "Simply being born into a religious tradition is not enough. To be able to say that you are descendants of Abraham and Sarah makes no difference in and of itself." To put it in contemporary terms, it's not sufficient to say that you come from a long line of religious people.

Inheriting a rich religious heritage is a valuable asset, but there comes a time when you have to claim that heritage as your own and make it an active, living part of your daily life. You cannot live forever on the faith of your ancestors. You need to make it your own faith.

We've all heard people say, "I don't have to worry, I come from the John Doe family, and that family has always been a prominent one." Others say, "My ancestors came over to this country on the Mayflower," or "I come from a long line of royalty," or "My family has been Methodist all the way back to John and Charles Wesley."

Pride in one's heritage is one thing, but assuming that therefore automatically some special status has been conferred upon you, or that God is particularly on your side more than someone else's, is a misunderstanding of God. Thus, John the Baptist warned the people of his time, "It's not enough merely to be able to say, 'We are descendants of Sarah and Abraham.'"

Many years ago, a play appeared on the Broadway stage that dealt with the declining fortunes of the English aristocracy after World War II. It was a comedy, and its plot revolved mostly around a young nobleman's rebellion against his blue-blooded family.

In one scene, the defiant son tells his parents what he thinks of them and their way of life in dramatic terms. "You are," he says, "parasites and exploiters. You fatten on the flesh of the toiling masses and drink the sweat of others' brows. I am resolved to have nothing further to do with you. From this moment on, consider me dead. You no longer have a son."

His father, a patient man, takes this outburst quietly but finally breaks in to pose a question. "That's all very well, but how do you propose to live?" At this point, the young man squares his meager shoulders, thrusts out an unimpressive chin, and replies, "I shall have to learn to live on my allowance."

John the Baptist was saying to the people in his tradition that some of them had been living on the spiritual allowance of their ancestors, but they needed more than that. He warned them that it's not sufficient to be able to say, "We come from a long line of very religious and faithful people. We have our spiritual allowance, which will always automatically come to us."

Nor is it sufficient for us. We always need to claim our spiritual heritage as our own. So many people who come from a Christian background neglect their own spiritual growth and continue to live on their allowance from the past.

Remembering and celebrating Christmas is a good beginning step. The celebration reminds us of our heritage all the way back into the Old Testament and of the fact that we are also children of Abraham and Sarah and Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, and most importantly of all, children of God.

Then we have to go beyond that remembering and reclaim that faith in God as our own. The fact that so many people in our culture celebrate Christmas shows there is a deep hunger within most of us for claiming our heritage.

It's not always easy. There are those whose lives have to be broken completely before they are ready to make their heritage their own.

Here's the story of one young woman. As a teenager, Beverly had gotten caught up in the craziness of the late sixties. A bright young woman, she started experimenting with drugs in her junior year of high school. She dropped out of college midway through her freshman year and drifted into a life of sex and drugs. Her distraught parents heard from her only when she needed money, and when they stopped sending it to her, she broke off all contact.

They had no way of knowing where she was living or even if she was alive. Then one morning, Beverly woke up in a shabby apartment in the bed of a man she didn't even like and said to herself, "I don't want to live like this anymore."

She went home. Her parents welcomed their prodigal daughter with open arms. The first thing Beverly did was take a long, hot bath and wash her hair — not only for relaxation and hygiene but as a symbolic washing away of the sordid past she was leaving behind. It was a kind of personal baptism. Instinctively, without realizing why, she felt she needed to immerse her body as a symbolic rebirth into a new, cleaner sense of herself.

Next, she told her parents she wanted to go to their church. She felt she had messed up her life and had to find her way back to God. They took her the next Sunday morning to the worship service. There she heard the good news that she understood as being something like this:

"God knows how fouled up your life has been, but God's love has never forsaken you. God is prepared to lift you out of the mud, wipe away your filth, and accept you as God's own. You are forgiven. Welcome back." Now she claimed her Christian heritage as her own.

When we make this God of our long heritage, as revealed in Jesus, our own, amazing things begin to happen. After all, our Christian faith is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers, a series of rituals, or a set of rules, important as all those are. Our Christian faith is first and foremost a way of seeing and living. It can't change the facts about the world in which we live, but it can change the way we see and respond to those conditions. Sometimes it's very complicated, as in the case of Beverly, and for some, it can be very simple.

The story is told of a shabby old gentleman who every day at twelve o'clock would enter the church, stay a few minutes, and then leave. The caretaker was concerned about the valuable

altar furnishings. Every day, he watched to be sure nothing was taken, and every day at twelve, the shabby figure would arrive.

One day, the caretaker questioned him. “Look here, my friend, what are you up to, coming into this church every day?” “I come to pray,” replied the old man politely. “Come on,” said the caretaker, “you don’t stay long enough to pray.”

“True enough,” said the old man, “I cannot say a long prayer, but every day I come and say, ‘Jesus, it’s Jim.’ Then I wait a minute and leave. I’m sure he hears me, though it’s but a little prayer.”

One day, Jim was knocked down crossing the street and was laid up in the hospital with a broken leg. The ward where Jim, quite happily, was placed was a sore spot to the nurses on duty. Some of the men were cross and miserable. Others did nothing but grumble from morning to night. Slowly but surely, the men stopped their grumbling and became cheerful and contented.

One day, as the nurse was walking through the ward, she heard the men laughing. “What has happened to all of you?” she asked. “You are such a cheerful lot of patients lately.”

“It’s old Jim,” they replied. “He’s always cheerful, never complains, although he is uncomfortable and in pain.”

The nurse walked over to Jim’s bed, where the silvery-haired Jim lay with an angelic look on his smiling face. “Well, Jim, these men say you are the cause of the change in this ward. They say you are always happy.”

“Aye, that I am, nurse. I can’t help it. You see, nurse, it’s my visitor. He makes me happy.”

“Visitor?” The nurse was puzzled, for she had never noticed any visitor by Jim’s bed. The chair was always empty during visiting hours. “When does your visitor come?” she asked.

“Every day,” replied Jim, with the light in his eyes growing brighter. “Every day at twelve o’clock, He comes and stands at the foot of my bed. I see him there, and he smiles at me and says, ‘Jim, it’s Jesus.’” Amen.