Sunday, December 6, 1998
JOHN THE BAPTIST
Matthew 3:1-12

The main characters of the Advent and Christmas story are familiar to all of us: Mary, Joseph, the baby, the angels, the shepherds, and the Wise Men. However, there's another very important participant in the events of Advent, Christmas, and what follows after that — John the Baptist.

According to tradition, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem.

For some unknown reason, Elizabeth and Zechariah had been unable to have children. When she was certain that she was beyond child-bearing age, she discovered she was pregnant. According to the Bible story, Zechariah learned of his wife's pregnancy in an unusual way. One day, when he was serving his regular assigned shift in the temple, he had a vision. In it, 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 informed Zechariah that their child, when an adult, would be an important "preparer of the way for the Messiah."

Six months later, Mary was 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 her child would be an important forerunner for the ministry of Jesus.

After Elizabeth's and Zechariah's baby was born, it was soon obvious that the child was a deeply spiritual person. He seemed to know at an early age that he had a special mission in life. Little else is known about John the Baptist's childhood or early adulthood. We can assume, however, that as he was growing up, he gained a deep appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of his religious tradition.

In the gospel stories, we next meet him as an outspoken and dynamic preacher.

There are some things about John the Baptist that many of us admire. There may even be some of us who prefer the preaching of John the Baptist to that of Jesus. His sermons, according to the New Testament accounts, were the "hellfire and brimstone" type. Some people prefer that kind of preaching. They like to hear that people who do not have the right belief are going to hell — as long as the preacher is not talking about them.

He was outspoken and called into question many of the very precious beliefs of the most religious people of his time. That kind of preaching the very religious people do not care to hear.

He even called them insulting names. "You brood of vipers," he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees. "Just because you are the descendants of Abraham, that doesn't give you any special standing with God." In other words, it's not enough to have religious ancestors.

No one that I know of appreciates having his or her religious heritage and way of practicing their faith called into question.

Like John the Baptist, that's what got Jesus into trouble later. He was always calling into question the conventional piety and wisdom of His day, including the conventional practice of religion. People who do that are considered by some to be subversive. However, such critics include some of the most famous figures of religious history.

Within Eastern religions, the two best-known teachers who questioned worldly conventional wisdom were Lao-tzu and the Buddha. Lao-tzu spoke of following a "way" that led away from conventional perceptions and values and toward living in accord with the "Tao" itself. At the center of the Buddha's teaching is the image of a way, "the eightfold path," leading from the world of convention and its "grasping" to enlightenment and compassion.

One of the leaders of the Western philosophical tradition, Socrates, taught a subversive wisdom that involved the citizens of Athens in a critical examination of the conventions that shaped their lives. For his efforts, he was executed.

Thinkers such as Copernicus and Galileo in their own fields of study called into question the conventional wisdom of their day, as did Darwin and Einstein. In any area of our lives, there are many people who do not appreciate having their long-held assumptions called into question.

John the Baptist was a religious version 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 was not asking his listeners to throw out their religious heritage but to be open to understanding it in a different way. In other words, he was asking them to build on it and expand their vision.

He wasn't saying the past was all wrong. John himself was part of that tradition. Rather, he was telling them that God continues to enter the world and our individual lives in new and surprising ways if we're open to them.

For some, that was an insulting message. Many of his contemporaries prided themselves on their religious heritage and believed that because they were born into that religious tradition, that was all that was needed. To them, John's statement was revolutionary and radical—"Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

John the Baptist is making two points here. First, he was saying to the people of his time and to us, being born into a certain religious tradition or heritage is a good beginning, but you have to go beyond that. To be able to say you are descendants of Abraham and Sarah makes no difference in and of itself as far as God is concerned.

To put it into contemporary terms, it's not sufficient to say that you come from a long line of Methodists or Baptists, or Presbyterians, or any other denomination, or to say that you were baptized as an infant or that you were confirmed at age 14 or 15. That can be a good beginning.

Inheriting a rich religious tradition 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. Then you have to continue to travel the spiritual journey, continue to grow and mature in your faith, and continue to explore new ways of discovering the will of God for your life.

The second point that John the Baptist made comes from the words, “I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” He’s saying that God’s dealing with us is not confined to the categories, institutions, creeds, ethnic groups, or denominations that we human beings construct. No one church or denomination has a monopoly on God or has the power to restrict or release God’s grace and love. God breaks out into our world and into our lives in ways we can never predict.

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, has taken this outburst quietly. But he 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 religious tradition that too many of them had been living on the spiritual allowance of their ancestors and they needed more than that. He warned them that it’s not sufficient to be able to say, “We come from a very 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 continually need to claim our spiritual heritage as our own. Too many people who come from a Christian background neglect their own spiritual growth and think they can live on their allowance from the past.

Remembering and celebrating Christmas is a good beginning step. This time of year reminds us of our heritage, all the way back into the Old Testament, and of the fact that each one of us is created in the image of God. Then we have to take the next step and reclaim that faith as our own. The fact that so many people in our culture celebrate Christmas shows there is a deep hunger within us for becoming more aware of our connection to God.

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 sixties. A bright young woman, she started experimenting with drugs in her junior year in 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, she broke off all contact.

They had no way of knowing where she was living or even if she was alive. Then one morning, she 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 this way anymore."

She went home. Her parents welcomed their prodigal daughter with open arms. The first thing Beverly did was to 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 the need to immerse her body as a symbolic dying and rebirth to a new, cleaner sense of herself.

Next, she told her parents she wanted to go to 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. 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 or rituals, or a set of rules — important as all those are. Our Christian faith is first and foremost a way of seeing the world and living in it. It is a journey. 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 season of Advent and Christmas can be for all of us a time of returning, a time of claiming our heritage as our own. It's also a time to grow spiritually. I hope it will be for you a time for moving beyond belief to relationship — a more loving relationship with the people you meet, work, and live with, and a more loving relationship with God. That's what John the Baptist was calling the people of his time to do. Amen.