Sunday, December 9, 2001
HEAVEN IS CLOSER THAN YOU IMAGINE
Matthew 3:1-12

The word “repent” can be one of the most misunderstood words in our religious vocabulary. When you hear the word “repent,” what image comes into your mind? My guess is that you see or think of someone, maybe even yourself, as being sorry for one’s sins or mistakes, and as a result, the one repenting resolves to change his or her behavior to bring about a moral, ethical, or religious conversion. That’s certainly one of the very important meanings of the word.

However, in the New Testament of the Bible and its use of the Greek word for repent, the definition is modified and expanded. Now it includes the concept of changing one’s mind and coming to a new way of thinking. To repent means being willing to reexamine some of your basic assumptions, to reconsider some of the things you’ve always believed, and in the process, even leave some of these beliefs and assumptions behind. That’s difficult to do.

Now you can understand why John the Baptist, one of the main characters in the early life of Jesus, was disliked and even hated by many of the religious leaders of his day. According to the story in Matthew’s gospel, the theme of most of his sermons was: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” His use of the word “repent” carried with it the expanded meaning of the Greek word for repent.

Here’s a paraphrase of John the Baptist’s basic message: “The presence of God, the Spirit of God, the power of God, and what you normally think of as the kingdom of heaven, is nearer than you ever imagined. It is close at hand. It is upon you. It is all around you. But you have to change your way of thinking about God and your relationship to God before you can be aware of it and enjoy God’s presence. Being brought up in a religious tradition is not necessarily enough.”

It’s difficult to have your way of seeing and doing things challenged, especially when there’s a long history behind them. Being open and being willing to consider new ideas can be very upsetting. This is especially true when it comes to your ways of understanding God, God’s creation, and how God relates to you. No one appreciates having his or her heritage of faith and way of practicing that faith called into question.

Satchel Paige, one of the best baseball pitchers of all time, liked to say: “It’s not what you don’t know that hurts you, it’s what you know that just ain’t so that can hurt you.”

Like John the Baptist, that’s what got Jesus into trouble when he began teaching and preaching. 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 and dangerous. However, such critics include some of the most famous figures in the history of religion, philosophy, science, medicine, human rights, and politics.

Within Eastern religions, the two best-known teachers who challenged the conventional wisdom of their time were Lao-tzu and the Buddha. Lao-tzu spoke of following a “way” that led away from conventional perceptions and values 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.

In the history of Christianity, leaders like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, and countless others called into question some of our most basic assumptions about God, God's grace, and how God relates to you and me day by day.

One of the leaders of the Western philosophical tradition, Socrates, taught what was considered a subversive wisdom that involved the citizens of Athens in a critical examination of the conventions that shaped their lives. For his efforts, like Jesus, 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 our own country, the people who led the anti-slavery movement were calling into question many of the basic assumptions about who is a human being. Later on, leaders in the civil rights movement carried these new ideas farther along. In addition, think of the many courageous women who led the movement for equal rights for women when, in times past, women were thought of as property and as having no rights.

The 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, granting women the right to vote, was not ratified until August 24, 1920, when the Tennessee Legislature delivered the crucial 36th ratification necessary for final adoption. On August 18, 1920, it appeared that Tennessee had ratified the amendment — the result of a change of vote by 24-year-old Harry Burn at the insistence of his elderly mother. But those against the amendment managed to delay official ratification. Anti-suffrage legislators fled the state to avoid a quorum and attempted to convince pro-suffrage legislators to oppose ratification. However, Tennessee reaffirmed its vote a few days later.

Incidentally, some states were slow with their endorsement even after the amendment became a part of the supreme law of the land. Maryland, for example, did not ratify the amendment until 1941 and did not transmit the ratification document to the U.S. Government until 1958.

The struggle for equal rights for women continues around the world and not only in places like Afghanistan. Unfortunately, in some Christian church denominations today, women still cannot vote or be ordained as ministers or be in any elected leadership position.

All of these leaders I have mentioned, and many more not named, were reformers like John the Baptist and Jesus who called upon people to "repent" in the New Testament meaning of that word; to be open to re-examining some of our basic assumptions and, when necessary, to be willing to change our ideas about God, how God works in the world, and our ideas about other human beings.

John the Baptist made one more very important point in his teachings. In his words, he said, "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."

What did he mean by that statement? He was saying that being born into a religious tradition is not enough. To be able to say you are descendants of Abraham and Sarah or anyone else, for that matter, makes no difference in and of itself. To put it in contemporary terms, it's not sufficient to be able 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 part of your daily life. You cannot live forever on the faith of your ancestors.

You've heard people say or imply, "I come from the John Doe family, and that family has always been a prominent one." Others say, "My ancestors came over on the Mayflower," or "I come from a long line of royalty," or "My family can trace its ancestry to John and Charles Wesley," or "I was baptized in First-Plymouth Church."

Pride in one's heritage is one thing, but assuming that your heritage automatically confers on you some extraordinary status or that God is especially on your side more than someone else who does not have a distinguished heritage, is a misunderstanding of the nature of God. Thus, John the Baptist warned the people of his time, "It's not enough to be able to say, 'We are descendants of Sarah and Abraham.'"

Nor is it sufficient for us. You always need to claim your spiritual heritage as your own and build on it.

Remembering and celebrating Advent and Christmas is a good beginning. This season reminds you of your heritage all the way back in the Hebrew scriptures. You are spiritual descendants of Sarah and Abraham, Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist, and Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

Then you need to go beyond that remembering and make that faith your own, all the time being open to the fact that the Holy One continues to be revealed and experienced in ways that are surprising. Many times the kingdom of heaven, which is another way of describing the presence of God, is closer than you can imagine.

This is especially good news for those who are tempted to become distracted during this holy season. If you find yourself being caught by a darkened mood because the holiday cheer has been drained by the loss of a loved one, an empty chair at the table, or a family breakup, and you are convinced that there is no way even a good Christmas party is going to set it right, remember heaven is closer than you can imagine. The power and presence of God are frequently experienced in the wilderness.

A sadness in life can bring us into an unknown darkness where we are unpredictable, even to ourselves. Yet it is in exactly these times that God can be most powerfully felt.

If you discover yourself choking on holiday cheer, too many parties and other activities, too much Christmas music, too many decorations, too many gifts to buy, too many catalogs in the mail, too many charges on your Visa or MasterCard, and you wonder what is underneath the tinsel of this season, the words of John the Baptist can bring you comfort. "The kingdom of heaven is near you… it is close at hand… it is upon you."

When we make this God of our long heritage, as revealed in Jesus, our own, amazing things begin to happen. After all, our journey in faith is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers, a series of rituals, or a set of rules, important as these things can be in bringing order into our lives.

Our faith in the Holy One is first and foremost a way of seeing and living in the present. It can't change the facts about the world in which we live, but it can change the way we experience and respond to those conditions.

The story is told of a shabby old gentleman who every day at 12:00 would enter the church, stay a few minutes, and then leave. The caretaker was concerned about this man's presence. Every day he watched the old man to be sure nothing was taken, and every day after being in the church at noon for only a short time, the old man would quietly leave.

One day, the caretaker questioned him. "Look here, my friend, what are you up to, coming into this church every day at noon?"

"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 or two and leave. I'm sure he hears me, though it's only a little prayer."

One day, Jim was knocked down crossing the street and was taken to a hospital with a broken leg. The charity ward where Jim quite happily was placed was a sore spot to some of the nurses on duty. Some of the men were cross and miserable. Others did little but grumble from morning to night. Slowly but surely, they stopped their grumbling and were more cheerful and contented.

One day, as one of the nurses was walking through the ward, she heard the men laughing.

"What has happened to all of you?" she asked, "You are such a cheerful group of patients lately."

"It's old Jim," they replied, "He's always so cheerful, never complains, although he is uncomfortable and in pain."

The nurse walked over to Jim's bed where the silver-headed Jim lay with an angelic look on his smiling face.

"Jim, these men say you are the cause for the change in this ward. They say you are always happy."

"Yes, that's true," he replied, "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 12:00 noon, 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.