Sunday, December 5, 2004
HEAVEN IS ALL AROUND YOU
Matthew 3:1-12

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” According to Matthew’s gospel, these were frequently the opening words of John the Baptist’s sermons. Here’s my paraphrase of his words—"Repent,” which means open your eyes and your minds. Heaven, the Spirit, and the presence of God are all around you, but you’re not recognizing it.” Jesus said the same thing in different words—"The kingdom of heaven is among you and within you. It is all around you. You don’t recognize it because you’re looking in the wrong places. Your idea of the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God is too limited.”

This was the chief theme running through the teachings of John the Baptist and of Jesus. When they used these terms, they were not referring to a power structure that would be imposed from above by a supernatural God. Jesus especially emphasized that the kingdom of God was entering the world quietly and unobtrusively. He compared the kingdom of God at work in the world to yeast working its way quietly through the dough. Unlike the kingdoms of the world, which impose authority from above, the kingdom of God would spread from the bottom, as people developed self-discipline and compassion for one another. The kingdom of heaven is not something in the future, in some faraway place. It is present in the here and now. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It is all around you.

The word “repent” is one of the most misunderstood words in the Bible. 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 your sins or mistakes. As a result, you resolve to change your behavior to bring about a moral, ethical, or religious conversion. That is one of the very important meanings of the word.

However, in the New Testament of the Bible, the Greek word that is translated into the English word “repent” also has a much broader meaning. The Greek word for repent includes the concept of changing one’s mind. It means being open to new ideas, being willing to reconsider some of the ideas you’ve always believed, and in the process even leaving some of these beliefs and assumptions behind. That can be difficult.

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 authorities of his time. It can be threatening to have some of your basic beliefs and your way of seeing and doing things challenged, especially when there’s a long history behind them and you have a lot invested in them. That can be very upsetting. This is especially true when it applies to your ways of understanding God, God’s creation, and how God relates to you and others. 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, Jesus got into trouble when, in his preaching and teaching, he began calling into question the conventional piety and wisdom of his time. People who do that are considered by some to be subversive and dangerous. This has been true of many of the most

famous teachers in the history of religion, philosophy, science, medicine, human rights, and politics.

For example, 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 in a different direction 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 suffering to enlightenment and compassion.

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

One of the leaders of the Western philosophical tradition, Socrates, taught what was considered 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.

Others, in their own fields of study, called into question the conventional wisdom of their day, as did Darwin and Einstein. In this country, the people who led the anti-slavery movement and later the overturning of segregation laws were calling into question many of the basic assumptions of their day. As a result, some were put in prison and others were killed.

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 constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote was not ratified until August 24, 1920, when the Tennessee Legislature delivered the final crucial 36th state ratification necessary for the final adoption of the amendment. The struggle for equal rights for women continues around the world, not only in places like Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, in some Christian church denominations today, women still cannot vote, 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 open their minds to new ideas. They were asking people to be open to re-examining some of their basic assumptions and, when necessary, to be willing to change their ideas about God, how God works in the world, and how God wants us to treat each other.

Consider how revolutionary it was for Jesus to teach—"Love your enemies.” He went on to say, “If you love those who love you, why should you be commended for that? Even the despised tax collectors do as much. But I tell you, don’t react violently against one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. When anyone forces you to go one mile, go an extra mile. Give to the one who begs from you; do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

John the Baptist made another very important point in his preaching in addition to calling the people to repent in the broadest meaning of that word. He said, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham and Sarah.”

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 into contemporary terms, 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 history to John and Charles Wesley," or "I was baptized in a church."

Pride in one's heritage can be a positive force in your life, 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 comparable heritage is a misunderstanding of the nature of God and the love 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.' You need to claim your spiritual heritage as your own and build on it."

Remembering and celebrating Advent and Christmas is a good way to once again examine your heritage all the way back to the Hebrew tradition. You are spiritual descendants of Sarah and Abraham, Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

Now you need to go beyond that remembering and make that faith your own. You need to repent in the broadest meaning of that word, which implies being open to the fact that the kingdom of heaven is all around you in surprising ways. This is especially good news if you are tempted to become distracted during this holy season. If you find yourself in a sad 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, remember heaven is all around you. The power and presence of God is also experienced in the wilderness.

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 MasterCard or Visa, and you wonder what is underneath all the tinsel of this season — the words of John the Baptist can bring you comfort: "The kingdom of heaven is near; it is all around you."

Remember too that your journey of faith is not merely a series of rituals or a set of rules, important as these things can be in bringing order into your life.

Faith in the loving God is first and foremost a way of seeing and living in the present. It can't change the facts about the world in which you live, but it can change the way you experience and respond to these conditions.

Here's one of my favorite stories, which you've heard me tell in other sermons. There was a shabby old gentleman who every day at 12:00 noon 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, and after being in the church 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," said 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 few minutes and leave. I’m sure he hears me, though it’s only a short prayer.”

One day Jim was hit by a car while crossing the street and was taken to a hospital with a broken leg. The ward where he 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 became 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 answered, “He’s always so cheerful, never complains, although he is uncomfortable and in pain.”

The nurse walked over to Jim’s bed, where silver-haired 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, it’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.