



Metanoia Moments

TEXT
Luke 3:1–14

December 6, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

One of the things I notice in the story, particularly this year when it's just you and me doing this second Sunday of Advent, is how many people went out to hear John. Several times it says huge crowds went out to see him. So, why would folks trek out to the wilderness to hear a bug-eating prophet who dresses in clothes that are more out of style than leisure suits? I think it had something to do with his sermon. John was a preacher with a one-point sermon: Love is coming ... so repent. Why would people be hungry to repent?

The Greek word is *metanoia*, and it literally means "to turn around, to go in a different direction, to change."

Personal change is hard, and we seldom want to hear the need for it from someone else. So, it's surprising that John was so popular. It sounds like every time John looks at us, all he sees is what's wrong with us. *You better fix that. You better shape up here. You know God won't tolerate this.*

But it's more complicated than that.

My friend Scott preaches in New York. He's one of the finest preachers I've ever heard and a gracious friend. When he and his

wife were dating, he was visiting her in the Twin Cities. Amy was living in an apartment complex where, coincidentally, most of the other residents were retirees. Scott is a good cook, and he was baking some homemade pizza. But during the process, he set something on fire — well, smoke mostly, but enough to set off the smoke alarm. It started screaming.

An elderly neighbor heard it and began banging on the door to let Scott know that the smoke alarm was going off — as if he couldn't tell that himself. Scott opened the door to let her know: "It's just pizza. There's no fire; it's just pizza." Opening the door let smoke out into the hallway, which set off the building fire alarm. In a matter of minutes, Scott was heading outside into a Minneapolis January with a large group of octogenarians. He tried to tell them, "You don't have to leave; it's just pizza." But they were determined.

As they waited for the firefighters to give the all-clear, he could hear them muttering to one another: "Someone said it's just pizza."

But here's the thing: If you have ever heard the smoke alarm sound, and you don't know why, you get very clear about your priorities. As Tom Long once said,

"The key to the deadbolt is much more valuable than the art on the wall, even if it's Rembrandt."

I think John hit a world that had forgotten what matters, like a smoke alarm. When people recognized what this metanoia man had to say, they were drawn to him like waves to the shore. He told them, love is coming. Repent, it's time to pay attention to what matters.

I know repent is a religious word that doesn't come up in conversation over coffee. But think of it this way. To repent means you can be different. Tomorrow can be a new day. The brokenness of yesterday doesn't define you. Things can change; we can change.

Cynicism is the cultural voice that tries to insist that the way things are is the way things ought to be. Repentance is the antidote to cynicism.

John, and Jesus after him, would never have called us to repent unless they believed we could. And, if I understand the text, they believed we could because they not only saw the good that could come from us, but they paid attention to the good already in us.

What do you think John would say to us these days? Probably the same things he talked about back then. He said, "Here is what mat-

ters! If you have an extra coat, share. Be fair with one another. If you have power, don't abuse it." In simple terms, he told us that we should learn to live with one another, live for one another. Of course, those simple terms have never been simple.

In Mark Dunkelman's book *The Vanishing Neighbor*, he asserts that in America, in recent decades, our cynicism has become so prevalent that we have lost confidence in the goodwill of the average stranger¹; that we view one another with a degree of suspicion.

I remember as a kid, Mr. Whitman delivered our mail. He drove a three-wheeled mail cart. Do you remember those? He would park it at the top of the hill on Churchhill Drive and then walk the block and back up. Danny Martin and I would walk with him. He told us we were his Mail Delivery Associates. When he got back to his mail cart, he let me and Danny stand in doorways with him as he slowly drove us from one end of the street to the other. Yes, this qualified as actual entertainment in my childhood.

There are a bazillion good reasons why that would never happen today, but there is also a loss. It's the loss, as Dunkelman says, of confidence in the goodwill of a stranger.

In the novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Johnny Wheelwright is Owen's best friend, and he reflects on what it's like to live in the small town of Gravesend. He says, "Small towns are ... places where you grow up with the peculiar. ... You live next to the strange and the unlikely for so

long that everything and everyone become commonplace."²

I think that's what John was talking about. John said, "Love is coming. ... Repent. You don't have to be perfect." Actually, maybe the place for repentance to begin is by recognizing an imperfect life is still loveable.

Like a smoke alarm, John said, pay attention to what really matters. Neither John nor Jesus could call us to repent unless they believed we could. And they believed we could change because they not only saw the good that could come from us, but they paid attention to the good in us already.

There are too many people who pass their time or even make their living pointing out everything that is wrong with everyone else. They think they are prophets, but they are not. No, what we need is to proclaim loud and clear that an imperfect life is still loveable. That's prophetic, and that takes courage. And if I understand it, that's why folks dragged their imperfect lives out to John. Because he and the one who followed him had confidence in the greater good that could emerge in us, because they paid attention to the good already in us.

There was a season in my life when I was a woodworker. I built furniture, in quite an amateur fashion. Because Carol is gracious, there's a butler table and some bookshelves I made in the living room, and upstairs a changing table I made when the kids were born. There's a pencil post bed — that was fun. But every single one of them has flaws. There's the place on the butler table where the router

jumped. There is that place on the bed where the pieces didn't join as smoothly as I intended. I see every flaw.

Over Thanksgiving, our daughter Sarah asked if she could have the dresser upstairs. "Well, it has that problem with the drawers."

"I know, but I love it," she said. She does — flaws and all.

We are all broken; not a one of us perfect. So, the call to grow is needed. But if I understand it, the first step is to recognize that you don't have to be perfect to be loved. An imperfect life is loveable. You are enough.

I think that's what John was teaching. People went to him because they trusted him, as well as the one who came after him, when they said, moment by moment we can change. The people trusted John because they could tell, he saw the greater good that could emerge from them, because he already saw the good in them.

So, on this second Sunday of Advent, trust that an imperfect life is loveable. You are enough. Rest and see what good emerges tomorrow.

¹Marc Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor* (2014), p. 135

²John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989), p. 73

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.