

A Cure for Despair: Matthew 3:1-12

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John the Baptist has always seemed to me like the Doberman pinscher of the gospel. In the lectionary, he always appears right before Christmas, when no one's defenses are up. Here we are trying to get to the stable in Bethlehem. We are not hurrying. We have set a respectable pace, and with just weeks to go it really is in sight—that starlit barn where everything is about to happen. It is right up ahead there, with people already gathering around it, and for those of us who love it, it is all we can see.

We aren't thinking about the few dark blocks that still separate us from it when all of a sudden—GRRROW-ROW-ROW!!!—this big old dog with a spiky collar has got us by the ankle. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Before he is through, our heads are pounding with vipers, wrath, axes, and unquenchable fire, when all we really wanted was a chance to sing, “O Holy Night.”

And yet there is no getting around him. Every single gospel writer introduces Jesus by talking about John, which means that in some way or another the Doberman is God's idea. John is the watchdog, who makes sure no one wanders into holy precincts unawares. He is the guard dog, who tests all those who *think* they want in. Anyone who cannot handle him cannot handle the one who comes after him. As different as they will turn out to be, John's judgment precedes Jesus' grace. They go together, like night and day, because those who know nothing of judgment need nothing of grace.

John's business was repentance. It was what his baptism was all about. It was not about becoming a Christian, because John was not a Christian. He had followers of his own, disciples who would become critics of the disciples of Jesus. So it is important not to confuse John's baptism with the one we know about. When John waded into the water with people, he was cleaning them up for their audience with God, which he believed would take place very soon. He begged them to change their lives in preparation for that event, and he was not below scaring them half to death if that was what it took—anything to wake them up and make them see that they were sleepwalking through their lives, most of them, confusing their own ways with God's ways and accumulating sin like an empty house accumulates dust.

He offered to hose them down, if they were willing. If they could come out of their comas long enough to see what was wrong and say so out loud, then he would wash it away for them, forever. Or God would. The same God who could make children of Abraham out of river rocks could make children of God out of them right there, if they were willing. All they had to do was consent, repent, return to the Lord and they could start their lives all over again before they even dried off.

The past would lose its power over them. What they had done, what they had said, what they had made happen and what had happened to them would no longer run their lives. They would no longer hear those nagging voices in their heads that told them how bad they were, how ruined, and in the silence that followed they would be free to begin again, listening to God's voice this time, telling them how blessed they were, how beloved.

As scary as John was, it was a pretty great offer. No wonder people walked days to get to him. No wonder they stood around even after their turns were over, just to hear him say it again and again. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” What sounds like a threat to us sounded like a promise to them. We hear guilt where they heard pardon, and at least part of the problem, I think, is our resistance to the whole notion of repentance.

The way most of us were taught it, repentance means owning up to how rotten you are. It means saying out loud, if only in the auditorium of your own soul, that you are a selfish, sinful, deeply defective human being who grieves the heart of God and that you are very, very sorry about it. It means dumping all your pride on the ground and stamping on it, since pride—as in ego, arrogance, vainglory—is the root of so much evil.

Only what if it isn’t? What if pride isn’t the problem at all, but its very opposite? What if the main thing most of us need to repent of is not our arrogance but our utter despair—that things will never change for us, that *we* will never change, that no matter what we say or do we are stuck forever in the mess we have made of our lives, or the mess someone else has made of them, but in any case that there is no hope for us, no beginning again, no chance of new life—? Now *that* is a problem.

I cannot tell you how many people I know who are all but dead with despair. It doesn’t happen just one way; it happens all kinds of ways. A little girl is abused by her grandfather and forty years later, although he is long dead and gone, his hands are still on her. She has not married. She will not let anyone get close. She is still keeping her forty-year-old promise never to let anyone hurt her like that again.

Or a family man loses his job and stays home with the kids while his wife goes to work. Their agreement is that they will change places again as soon as he finds something to do, only there are not all that many things he knows how to do. For a while he meets his goal of one interview per week, but after three months of rejections his energy just drains out of him until one afternoon his wife comes home and finds him sitting in front of the television set with an empty six-pack of Bud Dry at his feet.

Or a moody teenager doesn’t know what is wrong with him, but he can’t find anyone to talk to about it. His father is never home, his mother turns every talk into a sermon and he doesn’t want anyone to see him coming out of the counselor’s office at school, so he starts hanging out with some people who are even moodier than he is and that makes him feel better. When he is arrested for shoplifting a CD at the K-Mart, no one seems all that surprised. When his mother picks him up at the police station, she tells him he has been nothing but trouble since the day he was born and something inside of him that was still fluid up to that point hardens on the spot. All that remains to be seen is just how much trouble he can be. He will try not to let her down.

For most people, despair is a much more serious problem than pride will ever be. It is so serious that in the Episcopal Church we have a baptismal vow aimed right at it. Q: “Will you persevere in resisting evil and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” A: “I will, with God’s help.” It is a John the Baptist vow, and it is not about keeping an eye on our rottenness. It is about keeping an eye on our despair and never letting it get the best of us.

Those of us who have committed ourselves to a life of repentance and return will not give up on ourselves, no matter how many times we have to repeat the process. We will keep telling the truth and turning around, every day if need be. We will never say

never (I'll never recover, I'll never get it, I'll never learn). Why? Because we believe in God's goodness more than we believe in our own badness.

The kind of repentance most of us shrink from is all about us, in case you hadn't noticed. It is all about me, me, me, the miserable sinner. No wonder it is so revolting. The other kind of repentance, the healing kind, is far more interested in God. It spends more time looking at the kingdom than the mirror. It has more faith in God's power to make new than in our own power to mess up.

It is what John the Baptist offered people: a fresh start, a cold shower, a cure for despair. He offered it as a beginning, not an end. He knew there was someone coming after him who had something much stronger to offer, although he did not know who or what that was. Meanwhile, he was content to be God's watchdog, nipping at people's heels to get their attention so that they would be wide awake for what came next.

And no one, I think, was more surprised than he, when he looked up a short time later to see who was wading toward him through the water—not the ax-wielding lumberjack he had expected, not a bigger, meaner guard dog than he, but one as gentle as a child, who gentled even John. Amen.

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