

Sermon, Church of the Epiphany
Sunday, December 11, 2005
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If an unkempt person raised by wolves came to a street corner Epiphany and talked about a baptism of repentance, how would you respond? Actually, most of us don't have to imagine too hard. There are unkempt street preachers on the corners of DC telling us to repent, to pay attention – the world is coming to an end. However, I don't think most of us take them seriously and we would definitely not be would be heading on down to the Reflecting Pool to be baptized.

I don't think John the Baptist would look much different from the street preachers we encounter today. John the Baptist was not looking attractive. He wore camel's hair, and probably didn't smell too good. He had this wild appearance and yet people listened. What was wrong with the people in those days? Were they much better at seeing past appearance and clothing? They followed him in droves. John the Baptist had to go to a place where the water was abundant because so many people kept coming to be baptized. People wanted this baptism of repentance.

I was trying to imagine under what circumstances I would follow someone like John the Baptist. Of course the first thing that would stop me would be that I have been baptized, and in our church we are taught that we only need to be baptized once. Then I thought what if something else was being offered – something to symbolize a washing away of sins, a turning point, a renewal of baptism, a turning around. Renewals, turning around, repentance – these happen in my life over and over again so if I did run into a street preacher who reminded me of the necessity of that renewal, perhaps I would stop and participate in the event or ritual. I, like most others, look for the opportunity to start over and to tear down the old and start again. This is what repentance is about. That is what drew all those people to John.

However, many of us shy away from repentance. The word conjures up for us our sins and our guilt. We get stuck in feeling sorry for our sins. Mea culpa! Mea culpa! I have been a bad person and must change my ways. But there it is - the key – to change and to not just stand around saying how sorry we are and feeling guilty for all that we have not done. Forget about that. Forget about wishing you were a better person and keeping track of your faults as if you are going to persuade God to overlook them. God has forgiven you. The "sorry" part is only to push us forward to the next part.

Tracey Lind in her book, *Interrupted by God*, says Jesus is the carpenter and John is the demolition contractor. John's baptism is about repentance. John's baptism is about doing some demolition of the state our lives have fallen into and prepare our selves for the coming of Christ, the new construction, the new people we are to be.

Now demolition is not exactly fun. If you have done any work on your house recently, you know what I mean. It creates dust and inconvenience and sometimes you wonder how it is ever going to get put back together. But there is also the hope – the freedom from the ways things were – the ways that weren't working that were keeping you trodden down. I think this hope of what is to come is what draws so many of us to those home improvement shows –

you know, Extreme Makeover and all those shows on the Home and Garden network - HGTV. The old room or house is broken down and taken away. Then there is a mess, but slowly the new emerges – the new that is so wonderful.

I think the demolition analogy for repentance is very helpful. We get that sitting around and moaning about how bad our house is not very helpful. What would be the point? It wouldn't make a very good TV show. Imagine the person on the show saying, "My house is in terrible shape. I should have cleaned it out and fixed it up years ago. But oh well." What gets us interested in these home improvement shows is when something starts happening. It is when the walls get knocked out and built up in a new way. The paint color makes everything better and brighter so that it just "pops". This is the hope of the "new" that is to come and I think that the "new" that is to come is one of the reasons why the HGTV shows are so popular. The great thing about these shows is that it is not all hype about having a beautiful place. Sometimes the new room does fit in better with the family's life – perhaps creating a better space for the kids to do their homework or for a couple to spend time together in the evenings. Maybe this aspect makes these shows even more attractive to us. We long for the turnaround to make way for the new and this is what repentance is about.

Now if you have watched some of these programs closely, you will realize that there is that in-between time, when things are broken down but the way to get to the new isn't exactly clear. The cabinets don't fit. The paint for some reason has bubbles and the floor which was supposed to be fine is actually rotten and has to be replaced before anything else is done. Of course on the TV show, this in-between time is shortened. The camera is stopped while the problems are worked out so that the show can be finished in ½ an hour.

In our lives the rebuilding time can be a little longer. As Tracey Lind says "Sometimes after the demolition, as we try to figure out how to reconstruct our lives, there is nothing we can do but wait, watch, wonder and hope. We can join a fitness class. We can read a self-help book. We can update our resume. We can prepare a budget. But after all these actions are taken, we still have to wait and watch for the new life to emerge. We can plant the seeds and allow them time to germinate, sprout and bloom. We can paint the room, but we have to give it time to dry. We can begin the treatment but we have to wait for it to work. And in the mean time, as we wait for something good to happen, as we watch for the new beginnings, as we wonder what the future holds, as we hope for rebirth, we are called to trust and believe that we are "a living house" that God is doing a new thing with.

C.S. Lewis has an analogy for us being a living house – Imagine that you are a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps you can understand what God is doing. God is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently God starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is God up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but God is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

John the Baptist is the contractor hired for the first stage of reconstruction, the tearing down so that the new can be built up. John knew that the Lord was coming. How or when he didn't

know. He just knew that people had to get prepared for the great restorer of humanity, the repairer of the breach and the salvation of God. John's baptism is to clean away the old so that the new can be born. Repentance is the turnaround that follows the crash; the rebuilding that follows the demolition, the construction that follows the destruction. Repentance is too busy redeeming the present to apologize for the past. It is a matter of being grasped by God, of being picked up and being put down so that everything looks and feels different. Repentance is deliberately and intentionally changing the pattern of one's life and creating a new one.¹

John's baptism of repentance is about remembering that we are God's beloved and that we need to turn back around towards God. We need to get ourselves out of the way and become instruments of God. It is the decreasing of the old ways so that the new way which is Christ can come on in and live in you – the living house.

Tracey Lind also says that "The remarkable thing about repentance is that we get to do it over and over again. Repentance is not something that happens only once. Life is full of turning points, both large and small. If we miss the opportunity for repentance the first time, if we become complacent and forget, if we choose to ignore the invitation, or if we just can't help ourselves, the opportunity for repentance will present itself again and again. In this Advent, the time of waiting, this in-between time, John the Baptist is calling to us. John the Baptist is the deceiver – he challenges us to remove those things that get in the way of God living in us. Once they are removed, Christ can increase within us and we become these amazing people – ones we could never have dreamed of – not just small cottages but palaces with courtyards and towers – living palaces created so that God, the creator of the universe, can come and dwell within.

¹ Tracey Lind, *Interrupted by God*, The Pilgrim Press, 2004.