

## **“Life’s Interruptions are Divine Opportunities”**

January 10, 2021

Gospel

Matthew 3:1-12

### **John the Baptist Prepares the Way**

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea

and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”<sup>[a]</sup>

John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.

Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Around Thanksgiving, The New York Times printed an article titled: Pandemic – Proof Your Habits. Kate Murphy writes:

I attended a Thanksgiving dinner several years ago where the hostess, without warning family and friends, broke with tradition and served salmon instead of turkey, roasted potatoes instead of mashed, raspberry coulis instead of cranberry sauce and ... you get the idea.

While a few guests mustered the etiquette to say the meal was “something else,” most reacted with undisguised dismay. Some seethed. Others sulked. One young guest actually cried. No one had seconds.

It wasn't that the meal itself was bad. In fact, the meal was outstanding. The problem was that it wasn't the meal everyone was expecting.

The problem happens when there are discrepancies between expectations and reality, all kinds of distress signals go off in our brains. It doesn't matter if it's a holiday ritual or more mundane habit like how you tie your shoes; if you can't do it the way you normally do it, you're biologically engineered to get upset.

That all makes sense to me. I like routines. I like to be in control. I like to be prepared for whatever ever happens next. I want to be ready and not be caught off guard.

Our lives – for the last couple of years have been anything but predictable. We have had many disruptions to our plans or the way we thought it should be. First the death of George Floyd that insists we (white people) wake up to the horror and tragedy of racism, and then the pandemic that has killed millions and overtaxes our medical system and erased any sense of routine or tradition or normality. Whatever that is.

And of course, Wednesday, when hundreds of angry rioters somehow were able to storm the Capitol destroying anything in their way. I don't know why, maybe because how they thought their dangerous world view was slipping out of their control. Who knows, right?

“Our brains are statistical organs that are built simply to predict what will happen next,” said Karl Friston, a professor of neuroscience. In other words, we are hard wired to abate surprise.

He says that our brains, when uncertain, can become like overheated computers: That exertion, combined with any sense of threat, produces negative emotions like fear, anxiety, hopelessness, apprehension, anger, irritability and stress.

Hello world.

If you like to be in control of your circumstances, then you know what I am talking about. They're frustrating. They destroy lives. They get in the way of your plan.

And so, they need to be avoided or discarded or dealt with as soon as possible so you can get back to being in control, right?

I don't think so.

Those of us who follow Jesus shouldn't act this way when what we know is interrupted. So, I am thinking – maybe we shouldn't see interruptions as obstacles to our expectation and plans – but maybe an opportunity to embrace God's plan. Divine opportunities.

You are doubting me. Maybe rightly so. Hear me out.

Pay attention to the life of Jesus. He handled interruptions or disruptions all the time. Once he was interrupted by the death of his best friend and had to stop his planned work to return home, a woman with the issue of blood interrupted his preaching to be healed, no food for 5000 hungry people, and his death at the hands of the Roman Empire.

We would get angry. Because our brains are over loaded, we crave routine. It makes life make sense.

But that's not Jesus' response. He's not frustrated.

In fact, he shows compassion. Heals the sick, brings life from the dead and forgives the sinner – he felt compassion for the people. Compassion?

While we are busy figuring out a way to keep control, Jesus is thinking of how he can show compassion. He doesn't throw a pity party for himself. Instead, He puts others first. What would stir up frustration in us stirs up compassion in Jesus!

We think interruptions get in the way of "real life." That's why we don't like them. They remind us we're not in control. But you know as I do – interruptions are the stuff of real life.

So, the text this morning is perfect. Our lives have been interrupted by this screaming of a crazy person. (I'm not talking about the rioters or the President or political leaders who like to pontificate the same thing over and over.) We a John the Baptist who startles us. We call today Epiphany that literally means having a revelation or new ideas.

So, any control you might be craving will be interrupted by John the completely crazy Baptist yelling "Repent!" at you as little unchewed bits of crickets come flying out of his unshaven mouth. Happy New Year.

I used to hate that word, repent. Maybe you feel that way too, like when I hear a preacher shouting "repent" what I really hear is them saying is "Stop being bad and start being good or else God's going to be so mad at you that you will be burned in hell. Repent or burn!" Which feels like more

of a threat than anything else. And that just never worked on me. It always seems like... religious bullying or something.

And I just can't imagine that it was religious bullying which brought all of Judea and Jerusalem to be baptized by John. We know that fear and threats create change in behavior. No question about it. But fear and threats don't really change your thinking. Threats don't change your heart.

And that's what God is up to. Changing our hearts and minds. The Greek word for repentance is Metanoia which means changing your mind. – Changing how you think about something.

We want to make repentance about changing our lifestyles and maybe sometimes that is what is called for. But I also just think God is after more than that. I mean changing things in our lives can be a holy thing, but repentance isn't just about cleaning up your act. Because what metanoia means is to snap out of it, to think new thoughts... Which on the surface might seem pretty minor – changing our thoughts. Big deal, right?

This week I realized just how amazing thinking new thoughts sounds to me. Scientists tell us we are wired to about half a dozen neurological grooves that just funnel the same exact thoughts through your brain over and over, year after year.

“Like you are in bondage to a couple of deeply worn grooves that funnel all the same thoughts about what's good and bad about your life and about the world and about other people too.” (Nadia Weber)

And for some of us, the set neural grooves that produce the same thoughts over and over about ourselves are the most entrenched and the most harmful. I mean think for a moment about that. What thoughts do you think about yourself to yourself the most often? And would anyone who loves you ever think those same things? Are those the thoughts a God who loves you would have about you?

I'm not suggesting that thinking only positive affirmations about how wonderful we are – the world is – that is not accurate or even healthy – but I'm suggesting that some of us tend to only allow the negative aspects of who we are to enter into the equation. We can't help ourselves. We have these grooves in our brains that insist we think the same thing over and over.

But what if repentance means being freed from thinking these same thoughts over and over and that includes the thoughts, we have about ourselves.

This week I started to think that maybe the call to repent – the call to change our thinking isn't a threat – or even a command – maybe the call to repent is an invitation. It's like God saying to us, here, have some corrective lenses.

Maybe repentance means that God is offering us some brain spackle for those neural grooves.

You see, when all you have left are the same thoughts over and over, nothing ever gets to be new.

And we are told that Jesus Christ came to make all things new. Even us. Even our minds. Even the world around us.

I don't know about you, but I could go for a thing like that again right about now.

John the Baptist says that Jesus has a sifting fork in his hand, and he will separate the chaff from the wheat and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Now, the fire and brimstone street corner preachers might threaten us to repent or burn.

But today, I'm saying let's accept the invitation to repent AND burn.

God is offering us metanoia... to separate the good from the bad and burn away that which does not serve us.

So, the next time real life comes crashing into your idea that you are "in control," look for the opportunity to show compassion. Instead of being frustrated and angry look for the opportunity to reflect the compassion of Jesus. Is that difficult? You bet it is.

C.S. Lewis recommended that Christians stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's "own," or "real" life. He wrote:

"The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life – the life God is sending one day by day: what one calls one's 'real life' is a phantom of one's own imagination!"

Interruptions are not obstacles to our plan; they are opportunities for us to embrace God's plan.

So, my prayer is that we turn AND burn. I pray that all of us here may be given new thoughts. Our nation, our neighbors, our political leaders – new grooves into our hard-wired brain.

I pray the God who makes all things new, to help us let go of our old ideas. May God give us some divine spackle to fill in those worn neural grooves that produce thoughts that do not serve us and that do not serve God and that do not serve our neighbors. May God give us the strength to reach for

those corrective lenses she's wiping on her shirt and handing to us so we can see with new minds. Minds that see God's glory amidst the chaos. Minds that perceive God's hand at work in even the most annoying people in our lives. Minds that move more toward curiosity than judgment. May God burn away the old. And make us new.

Repent and burn, people of God. Repent and burn.

In God's blessed and holy name,

Amen.