

Sermon by Leonard VanderZee: “Shedding Your Skin” from Matthew 3

Every time Advent rolls around we discover again that we can't get to the manger and the stable without going past John the Baptist. There he is, out there in the wilderness, with his ragged leather clothes, and locust wings stuck between his teeth. Barbara Brown Taylor says that John always seems to her like the Doberman pinscher of the gospel. He's there nipping at your heels, growling for repentance. “Before he's through our heads are pounding with vipers, wrath, axes, and unquenchable fire, when all we wanted was a chance to sing “O Holy Night.”

John may be a stark figure, and his message is surely daunting, but it's a message that's a necessary part of our faith: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is drawing near.” The trouble is that words like sin and repentance just don't seem to resonate very well in our culture. They have the faint musty smell of outdated words like vouchsafe and behoove. Taylor says, “Once upon a time, the vocabulary of new life included such words as sin and salvation, penance and repentance, but these days we do not seem to be able to say them without stammering. We are more comfortable with words such as sickness and health, love and acceptance. These words place no blame, impute no fault, expect no change, except the change from feeling bad to feeling better, as we are forgiven for being exactly who we are.”

What is repentance? I would guess that if I were to ask most of you that question I'd get a wide variety of answers. But I would also guess that for most of you, it leaves a slightly bad taste. It's about guilt and remorse; it's dragging up all our sordid sins. It's like facing an angry parent, or a disappointed professor. So we mostly avoid it, or maybe don't really know how to go about it. Like a computer neophyte who doesn't know RAM from ROM, we don't know how repentance works or what it means.

But we can't just ignore it. Theologian Paul Tillich said years ago, that the great words of the Christian tradition cannot be replaced. There are no adequate substitutes. Avoiding them, or abandoning them diminishes our faith into something barely recognizable. What we have to do instead is rediscover their meaning. And the way to do that, says Tillich, is “the same way that leads us down into the depths of our human existence. In that depth these words were conceived; and there they gained power for all ages; there they must be found again by each generation, and by each of us for himself.”

I want to do a little digging into the depths of our souls this morning, and try to find at least one way to reconnect with the idea of repentance. Here's something I see in lots of people, and sometimes find in myself. We feel stuck. It may be a destructive pattern we have in relationships that always seems to make them go sour. It may be an inability to focus our energy and time on anything good. For some it's hurts from the past that continue to cast a dark shadow over their lives, with its resulting depression and helplessness. For others it's patterns of addiction or destructive behaviors that erupt again and again, and we can't even conceive of living without them. People live every day with pressing anxiety, deep sadness, essential boredom, self-destructive behavior, and they can't shake it. They're stuck.

Well, my friends, that's sin. Sin is all those patterns, behaviors, activities, and habits that have us trapped in their vise-like grip. Sin is much more than the actions of the moment. These are but symptoms of deep down patterns, well-worn pathways we can't seem to break out of. Sin is

a name for the experience of being cut off from God, who is the source of true life and joy, and it cuts a swath of sadness, hopelessness, and brokenness through our lives and our world

Then what about repentance? The typical picture is the “I’ve been bad” scenario, in which, like a kid caught in the act, we admit how screwed up we really are. That’s part of it. But do you think that’s what attracted all those thousands of people to hike out to John the Baptist in the wilderness? It wasn’t just the chance to admit how bad they were, it was the hope of something better. That’s the heart of what repentance means.

The word in Greek is *metanoia*. *Meta*: transformation, *nous*: mind. It’s the second part that’s the key here. Mind did not mean just the brain. Frederica Matthewes Greene describes it as the innermost consciousness, a region that lies below both rational thought and emotion. Paul used it this way, “be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” (Rom. 12: 1) The classic second century Christian letter called “the Shepherd” says, “Repentance is great understanding.” Repentance is not blubbering and self-loathing, it’s insight!

Greene says, “The insight is about our true condition. We begin to see our fallen inclinations the way God does, and realize how deep-rooted is the rottenness in our hearts. This awareness grows slowly, over many years, because God mercifully shows us only a little at a time. But he sees it all. His is like the eye of a surgeon, which sees through to the sickness deep within. There is no other way for us to be healed. It’s when the surgeon says, ‘All we can do is keep him comfortable,’ that you’re really in trouble.”

Seeing what we really are is a hopeful thing. It’s hopeful because we’re seeing ourselves through the eyes of a God who won’t leave us where we are, but wants to transform us into being fully human, fully alive.

So many of us just feel stuck where we are. We slouch through life with a kind of lingering despair. Knowing God forgives, we are somehow unable to grasp it for ourselves. Wanting to change, we feel powerless to do it.

This feeling of being stuck in our skin is the true enemy of repentance. Repentance is the joyous, hopeful awareness that God never gives up on us, and neither must we. No matter how many times it takes, we keep telling the truth about ourselves and turning around. Brown Taylor says, “We must 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.” True repentance isn’t about me and my limited powers and possibilities, it’s about God. “[Repentance] has more faith in God’s power to make us new than in our power to mess up.”

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one of C. S. Lewis’s Narnia stories, Eustace commits an act of betrayal that makes him turn into a thick-skinned dragon. (Lewis has such wonderfully imaginative ways of picturing Christian ideas.) One day he is surprised to meet up with Aslan, the Lion, before whom he feels ashamed. Aslan leads Eustace over the mountains to a lovely valley with a bubbling spring-fed pond. Eustace wants to bathe, but before he can, Aslan tells him to undress, which sounded strange since he has no clothes, until he remembers that dragons, like snakes might shed their skins. So he scratches and scratches, and the skin comes off layer after layer. It lies there beside him, the ugly gnarly dragon skin. But after peeling off several

layers of skin like a banana peel, he was still all scaly and ugly. Finally the Lion said, “You must let me undress you.” “I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you”, Eustace says, “but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.”

“The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know- if you've ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like [crazy] but it is such fun to see it coming away.... Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just like I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt-and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and knobbly-looking than the others had been... Then he caught hold of me... and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything, but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone.... And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again.”

God wants to turn us into real people, whole and good and joyful, with lives filled with meaning and purpose. Repentance is letting God’s Spirit peel away the gnarly skin of our sinfulness, layer after layer. And baptism is the bracing splash of new life, along with the power of the Holy Spirit to start afresh. John points to Jesus and says, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” He will make things happen.

Like Eustace, we’re afraid of looking squarely at our sins, the habits, the memories, the emotions that keep us stuck where we are. We feel we’ll be overwhelmed by them. But, says Matthewes Greene, the reverse turns out to be true. The more we see the depth of our sin, the more we realize the height of God’s love. The constant companion of repentance is not sadness, but gratitude. Seeing ourselves as we are in the light of God’s grace becomes, to our surprise, an occasion for joy. We’re free. Free not to hide any more, not to conceal or impress or make excuses for ourselves. Free to love God with abandon, and to love others without bargaining and conditions. Most of all, we’re free to turn around, because this is not merely our work, which only brings despair, but the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Repentance is knowing that God never gives up on us, and so we must never give up on ourselves. Repentance means turning from the despair that we’re stuck with our past with its habits and memories, to the hope of fresh new beginning every single day of our lives.