

The Rock Tumbler

A Sermon by the Rev. Denise Clapsaddle

Matthew 3:1-12

- 3:1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,
3:2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."
3:3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"
3:4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.
3:5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,
3:6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.
3:7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
3:8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance.
3:9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.
3:10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
3:12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Once again this Sunday we hear a message from a very serious, very intense messenger. Last week we heard from the apostle Paul. Today we hear from John the Baptist. And once again, the message is, get ready! Prepare! This time the way we are told to prepare for the coming of Christmas is, Repent!

"Repent" is not a word we hear very often. Every time I have to talk about it in a sermon, I feel compelled to define what it means to repent. We use terms like, being sorry, having regrets, expressing remorse when we feel less than thrilled with our own behavior. Repentance includes all of these, but takes it a step further and includes a turning away from the regrettable behavior and heading off in a new direction. Repentance means more than just change. When we picture repentance, I think people picture gritting your teeth and trying very hard to be different, without any help from anyone else. Repentance sounds like a lonely, painful, difficult struggle. But that's not how we need to be in order to repent. Repentance means transformation, but it's not even a transformation that we do ourselves. Repentance means allowing ourselves to be transformed by God. And so the call that John the Baptist makes to us today is maybe a little bit intimidating, but it is also an inspiring call. It is a call to open ourselves to transformation.

Deep down, I think most of us do not believe that transformation is possible for us. Most of us feel that we do not change much, as people, from the time we are in our late teens or early twenties. Inside, most of us feel like the same person we were when we reached maturity. We women often wear the same hairstyle and makeup from that time period. Many of us, men and women, dress the same as we did during that period of our lives--especially when we are able to wear casual clothes. Transformation seems strange, and probably scary. If God transforms us, what will it feel like? Who will we be? What will we be?

The truth is, transformation happens every day, to all kinds of people. From the outside looking in, it's often invisible. In a book of essays, short story writer Andre Dubus wrote about the transformation he underwent when making sandwiches to bring to his young daughters when he picks them up after school. "On Tuesdays, when I make lunches for my girls, I focus on this: the sandwiches are sacraments. ...If I could give my children my body to eat, again and again without losing it, my body like the loaves and fishes...I would do it. And each motion is a sacrament, this holding of plastic bags, of knives, of bread, of cutting board, this pushing of the chair, this spreading of mustard on bread, this trimming of liverwurst, of ham. All sacraments, as putting the lunches into a zippered book bag is, and going down my six ramps to my car is. "Dubus, who died in 1999, was handicapped due to an accident in 1986. He was hit after he got out of his car to help somebody else. For Dubus, making sandwiches for his daughters is transformed by his thinking, and becomes a transforming experience, because he takes the time to

become aware of how making sandwiches is part of providing them with nurturing. So the transformation we are told to seek changes everything even when it seems to change nothing. The transformation we seek takes place on the inside, or at least comes from the inside out. I have heard cynics say that people do not change. That is simply not true. I have seen many people undergo transformations. But our idea of how transformation happens is clouded by most of the transformation stories that are in the news and part of entertainment today. Often those are stories of transformations that take place from the outside in--people have their homes remodeled, or receive weight loss surgery or a complete makeover with a new hairstyle, makeup and wardrobe, and report that it changes them. It's easier and more dramatic to show these transformations, but deeper transformations are often slow and gradual and unfold over a period of months or years. We must take care to examine ourselves and see to it that we have not become too impatient for transformation.

I myself am not a patient person by nature. My spiritual path is a path of developing patience. My husband, a steady and patient person, is a very helpful guide and companion on this journey. Often after my impatience has led me to make a mistake that I have to fix, he helps me to examine my behavior to see how I can handle similar situations different in the future. My impatient nature has helped him to learn that many times when problems arise, they need to be dealt with swiftly in order to keep things from spiraling out of control. His patient nature has taught me that it's good to lead with your heart, but it's crucial to fully engage the brain before setting off on some new venture. I made the decision to repent of my impetuous ways, which has led me to say things that led to embarrassment, hurt feelings or misunderstandings. I'm not sure what made me like this. Part of this was an impatient nature, a nature that makes it hard for me to see that sometimes I need to calm down before dealing with something that arouses my emotions. Part of it was a feeling that I was valued as a person for being entertaining and witty, rather than being caring and wise. In the past I've been the person to lighten a heavy moment with a joke. Now I understand that groups that fall into painful, tense moments often need a deeper kind of transformation, one that requires patience, understanding, and time. My transformation into a person who does not offer mere wit when wisdom is called for is not easy, and it is not happening overnight. But I am seeing signs that the transformation is underway.

Earlier this week our regional minister asked us to write a letter to a church that was considering leaving our denomination. My first response, when I heard about this, was to feel angry. I felt I would have nothing useful to say until I could get past the anger. But I discovered that under the anger was a tremendous amount of pain. I don't know why the church was considering leaving our denomination, but the general assumption was that it had something to do with a controversial non-binding resolution passed at the October Annual Meeting. I feel that people of good will are on both sides of this issue. It seemed to me, though, that they did not want to be associated with people who did not share their opinion on this particular issue. That hurts. Our denomination is diverse. We hold diverse opinions, often in the same congregation. I like the idea of a church being a place where we share our opinions and consider different viewpoints, not a place where we go over the points that we agree on and congratulate ourselves on being perfect. Sometimes people are inspired to change their minds. In any case, the sharing leads us to grow.

In college I was on an extended hiatus from church. One of my roommates would argue with me about Christianity. I argued back, but the things she said got to me. It worked on my heart. At the end of the year, I was ready to go back to the church. Around the same time, she left the church. We had transformed each other. Today, twenty years later, she is a Unitarian Universalist. This past week, when our denomination's longstanding plan to start an ad campaign turned into a controversy, I emailed my friends from college, including her, not so much to get them to protest, but to vent my feelings of frustration, and to let them know how they could view the ad and show others how to view the ad. Here is the email message I received back from her when I wrote her about the ad controversy: "Thanks for the info, Denise. And for the action idea, Brian. (Brian is another friend from college, a Catholic who works for an Interfaith group in Cleveland, who sent out instructions on how to fax the networks. He is also the person who I asked to accompany me to Church services when I returned to the church for the first time after my seven-year hiatus.) She continues, "I've sent my letter--it's easy, and allows you to edit or add if you choose. This is now making it's way via e-mail to various activist types in Syracuse, and I'll take info and a sample letter to my UU church on Sunday. So glad there's people like you all, still... always... --Radell"

Do we seek the transformation of repentance, as John the Baptist passionately advocates we should? Consider the significance of being in this place at this time. What does that mean for your quest for transformation? It could very well be that the source of your transformation is to be found within these walls. Are you a passionate person who

would like to gain a bit of control over your impetuosity? Perhaps there is someone even tempered sitting near you, someone who could learn from you how to connect to their own passion and live a more spontaneous, adventurous life. Are you an older person, a person with most of your years behind you? Your wisdom and experiences could be of great value to a younger person who would like to follow a similar path in life. Sometimes--often--the circumstances and relationships in our lives lead us to an experience of frustration. In the midst of that frustration, if we apply our attention and faith, are the seeds to the transformation we seek. This is the powerful good news of the gospel--that God wants to provide for our needs through the process of spiritual transformation.

One year for Christmas my brother received as a gift a rock tumbler. He would put in a bunch of rocks with rough surfaces, and the tumbler would turn around and around. After the specified period of time, days or weeks, he would open the tumbler and the rocks would all be smooth and shiny. The beauty of the rocks, previously hidden by the rough surfaces, would be readily visible. This is the process of transformation that we engage in. We are like the rocks, tumbling against each other as we interact. It is hard to see minute by minute, day by day, but our rough surfaces are being polished smooth. We are doing this for each other. The kind of rocks we are doesn't matter. What we look like when we enter the tumbler does not matter. Lots of different colors and shapes of rocks just means more variety and beauty.

My brother's tumbler took so long that it was hard not to stop it early, to see how things were going--especially since we were kids, and kids are not known for patient waiting. It can be tough to stick with a process that does not seem to be working because we can't always see the results yet. Rest assured, if you truly desire transformation, you will be transformed. From the moment the desire for transformation forms in your heart, you are being transformed.

This week our denomination was transformed by a controversy over a national television ad. As most of you have probably heard, some national networks refused to air one of the ads produced. They found it too controversial. The controversy over their refusal led millions of people to view the ad, and to hear the message of the ad, which is, "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we. The United Church of Christ. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." Some of the images in the ad are jarring to people raised in the church. I was a little startled at first. I'm in an urban theater group, and I used to work at a University, so I know lots of different kinds of people, but when I saw the beginning of the ad, I thought, some of those people don't look like the people in our congregation. But then when the words came on the screen saying, "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we," I started to tear up. That is so much my experience here at the Riverton Church--that we are here for the community, and we don't turn people away. I still can't see those words on the ad without tearing up. We got more publicity, positive, negative, sensational, you name it--in one day than in the entire history of our church in this country, and we trace our roots back to Plymouth Rock. It's a dizzying time. I feel that as a denomination, we are going through a rock tumbler right now. I'm not sure how we will look after our transformation, but I trust that it will be beautiful.