

12-05-10

Matthew 3:1-12 (Christmas Pickles)

Introduction

I'm going to guess that most of you aren't familiar with the name "Doug Mendenhall." For what it's worth, Doug is a Christian author and motivational speaker...and he wrote a brief parable that seems well-suited to the Advent season. The story begins, "Jesus called the other day - to say that he was passing through and to find out if he could spend a day with my family."

- I said, "Sure...love to see you. When are you coming?" After all – it was Jesus...and it's not every day you get the chance to visit with him. It's not like your in-laws...and you have to stop and think whether the advantages outweigh the costs of you having to move to the sleeper sofa.
- But that's when Jesus told me that he was actually at a convenience store out by the interstate. I must have gotten that Bambi-in-the-headlights look, because my wife hissed, "What's wrong? Who is that?"

So I covered the receiver and told her that Jesus was going to arrive...in eight minutes...and she ran out of the room and started giving instructions to the kids—the way a drill sergeant gives orders to recruits. My mind was racing, too, with everything that needed to be done in the next eight—no seven—minutes - so Jesus wouldn't think we were "degenerate loser slobs."

- I turned off the TV in the den...which was blaring some weird scary movie I'd been half watching. But I could still hear screams from our bedroom...so I turned off the reality show that was on the TV in there. Plus, I turned off the kids' set out on the porch...because I didn't wanna have to explain Jon & Kate Plus Eight to Jesus – when he showed up six minutes from now.
- My wife had already thinned out the magazines that had been accumulating on the coffee table. She put Christianity Today on top for a good first impression. But now there were only five minutes to go.
- I looked out the front window...and the yard actually looked pretty good - thanks to my long, hard efforts... so I let it go. What could I improve in four minutes anyway?
- I did notice that the mail had come...so I ran out to grab it. Mostly it was Netflix envelopes and a bunch of catalogs related to recent purchases...so I stuffed it back in the box. Jesus didn't need to get the wrong idea—three minutes from now—about how much on-line shopping we do.
- I ran back in and picked up a bunch of shoes left by the door...tried to stuff 'em in the front closet...but it was over-flowing with heavy coats and work coats and snow coats and pretty coats and raincoats and extra coats. For heaven's sake: we live in the South. WHY'D WE BUY SO MANY COATS? But I squeezed the shoes in with just two minutes to go.

I plumped up sofa pillows...and my wife tossed dishes in the sink...I scolded the kids...and she corralled the dog. With one minute left I realized something very important: Getting ready for a visit from Jesus is not an eight-minute job. And that's when the doorbell rang."ⁱ

- What would you do – if you knew for a fact that Jesus would be coming at any minute? Well guess what? He is...and that's what the Advent season is all about.

Transition

We're in the second week of Advent...and Christmas is just around the corner. We know that, of course...and so I'd be willing to bet that most of us are working pretty hard to make sure that everything's ready.

- But especially in this 2nd week of Advent—and especially in the scripture lesson we read this morning—we're reminded that 'getting ready for a visit from Jesus...is NOT an 8-minute job.'
- And perhaps more even importantly, we're reminded that it's not an EXTERNAL job, either. No amount of cleaning the house or rearranging the magazines...no number of cards in the mail or decorations on the tree...will allow us to BE READY for Jesus when he comes...because as John "The Baptizer" announces: you must "Change your life. God's kingdom is here." (Mt. 3:2).

John “The Baptizer”

At first glance, at least, the appearance of someone like John the Baptist seems like a rude intrusion into the Christmas season. After all, when we think about Christmas – we probably think about lights and greenery. We picture festive gatherings with family and friends...and the sweet baby Jesus, lying in a manger.

- But suddenly—here comes a crazy street preacher. He’s “dressed in a camel-hair habit...and he lives on a diet of locusts and wild field honey.” (Mt. 3:4) And his message—rather than focusing on ‘peace on earth, goodwill toward men’— is harsh and demanding: Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God’s arrival! Make the road smooth and straight! (Mt. 3:3)
- It’s almost like having a madman walk into your Christmas party - and throw all the food on the floor!

And yet, there’s something essential about this unexpected character...AND about his unexpected message. John breaks into our comfortable holiday routines and reminds us what it’s all about: there is one coming who “will ignite a kingdom life within you...a fire within you...the HOLY SPIRIT within you—changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God...and everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.” (Mt. 3:11-12)

- And as we listen to John’s message, the question we need to ask ourselves is: Do we really believe that? Do we have a passionate expectation that the reign of God is close at hand—that broken things are about to be restored...and that exalted things are about to be brought low? Do we anticipate - that a visit from Jesus is coming...and that his visit will change the world...and change us?
- And if we do believe that...what are we prepared to do about it? Because at the heart of John’s message is this idea: God is coming – and so we have a responsibility. There’s something we must do - if we wanna be a part the kingdom life that’s just around the bend. But what is that ‘something’?

Repent and Be Baptized

Well...if John is the one who comes to help us get ready...then the answer to that question is fairly clear: We must repent and be baptized. That’s what John’s ministry was all about...right? Like our scripture lesson said this morning, “There at the Jordan River - those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life.” And we know about repentance and baptism, don’t we?

- Repentance and baptism mark the time that we acknowledge our sins and confess them to God.
- When we repent and get baptized, we express sorrow for the mistakes we’ve made and the ways we’ve fallen short – and we vow to do better.
- In repentance and baptism, we’re washed in water—as a symbol of the forgiveness God offers us in Jesus...and as a public declaration – that we wanna give our hearts to him.
- Isn’t that what repentance and baptism are all about?

Well: yes...it is. And because repentance and baptism are about these things – they’re an essential and non-negotiable step in the life of any person who wants to be a follower of Christ.

- Nobody drifts accidentally into being a disciple of Jesus. Hanging out at church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than hanging out in a garage makes you a Chevy truck.
- “God,” as they say, “does not have any grandchildren.” We don’t get to heaven because mom or dad—or grandma or grandpa—were faithful believers. No, we become followers of Christ because we decided.
- One preacher from back in the early 1900’s put it like this: “God will take nine steps toward us, but he will not take the tenth. He will incline us to repent, but he cannot do our repenting for us.”ⁱⁱ

And so—if we want to be ready for a visit from Jesus—we have to decide. Have you - decided? Alyssa did...and it’s good that this church family...and so many of her friends and family...are able to be here today to celebrate that decision. But that was Alyssa...and God is asking you: Will you decide? And maybe just as important: Will you keep deciding? Because you see – if there’s one mistake that we sometimes make when it comes to repentance and baptism – it’s the mistake of acting as if we can decide - and be done with it.

“Oh, yes,” we’ll say. “I repented and got baptized. It was back in Vacation Bible School...or high school...or some other time (I can’t remember exactly when). But I walked the aisle...I got saved and baptized...and now I’ve got my ticket stamped for heaven.”

- Well you know; because of God's grace—that’s absolutely true. If you gave your heart to Jesus and followed him in baptism, then you are saved...and you will go to heaven...because our salvation and our eternal destiny depend on God’s grace—and not on our ability to live a perfect life.
- [As a little ‘theological side-note’—that’s the reason that we generally don’t encourage people to get re-baptized every time they make a recommitment. After all, if we had to get baptized every time we screwed up and turned back to God...we’d be in the water so much - we’d start to prune up!]

But here’s the thing: As wonderful as it is that God gives you salvation and is preparing a place for you in heaven...you were created for even more than that. You were created to become like Jesus.

If you dig a little deeper into the biblical concept of repentance, you find that the word that the Bible uses for “repent” is the Greek word *metanoia*...which—literally—means “changed mind.” And when we repent, that’s exactly what we do. We change our minds—not just about sin and our feelings toward it—but about life and our purpose in it. We don’t just turn away from an old life. We turn and embrace a new life—a life based on the conviction that the God’s kingdom IS here.

And if God’s kingdom is here – then everything changes. We no longer need to worry so much about coming out on top—because in the kingdom, the last will be first and the first will be last...and the greatest will be ones who serve. We no longer need to get even with others when we’re wronged—because in the kingdom, God’s grace enables us to forgive as we’ve been forgiven.

- When the kingdom of God is here, we don’t need to get so focused on the ‘stuff’ that we give and receive at Christmas—all the sweaters and gadgets and doo-dads and presents—because those things (we realize) – are things that moths and rust can destroy...and thieves can break in and steal. But in the kingdom, our treasure is where our heart is: bowed in worship and wonder around the manger of Bethlehem.

And these types of changes—this switch from being ‘normal people’ to ‘kingdom people’—DOESN’T TAKE PLACE ALL AT ONCE. We can’t decide and be done with it. We have to keep deciding. The change has to keep taking place - every moment – of every day – as we die to ourselves...and are raised to walk in newness of life.

- You and I may get baptized only once in a physical sense (or twice if we ‘rededicate our life’ somewhere along the way and the preacher feels its appropriate). But in a spiritual sense, we need to get baptized every day—as once again - we turn away from darkness and toward the light... as once again we immerse ourselves deeply – in the gushing fountains of endless life that Jesus promises to put within us.

Now, if you think that sounds like a challenging way to live...you’re right. It’s no easy thing to develop the ‘mind of Christ’ – to look not only to our own interests - but also to the interests of others. It’s no cakewalk - to take up our cross and follow Jesus. But don’t be afraid, “For behold, I bring you good news of great joy”: What we could never manage to do on our own...God delights to do for us. I want you to listen to these words written by a pastor named Richard Jensen. In a book titled, *Touched by the Spirit*, he says...

- The daily baptismal experience has many names. It can be called repentance...but repentance is often understood as an “I can” experience. “I’m sorry for my sins. I can do better.” And so we interpret repentance as our way of turning to God. BUT THAT CAN’T BE. Christianity is not about us turning to God. Christianity is about God turning to us.
- In repenting, therefore, we ask the God who has turned toward us—the God who buried us in baptism... and raised us to new life—to continue his work of putting us to death. Repentance is an “I can’t” experience.

- A repentant person comes before God saying, "I can't do it myself, God. Kill me and give me new life. You buried me in baptism. Bury me again today. Raise me to live again." That is the language of repentance...the daily experience that renews our baptism.ⁱⁱⁱ

Christmas Pickles

Advent reminds us that Jesus is coming...and that he is so much closer to us – than we ever would have dared to hope. And so...if we want to be ready...we need to decide (to repent and be baptized)...and we need to keep deciding (as every day, we repent...and remember our baptism...and allow the living waters of Jesus to do their transforming work).

Now if you've been following along so far...and if you're the kind of person who pays attention to things that are written in the bulletin (things like the sermon title)...you might be thinking right about now, "Okay, Pastor...but what does all this have to do with Christmas Pickles?" Well as we close, let me try to explain...

It just so happens that I brought a Christmas Pickle with me this morning. And according to the tradition of the Christmas Pickle (and I'm not making this up...you can look it up online)—on Christmas Eve...after all the kids have gone to bed...mom and dad hide a pickle (or an appropriately shaped ornament) on the family tree. And on Christmas morning, the first child to find the pickle—gets an extra gift.

- So in one way, "Christmas Pickles" is a way of saying that God wants to give you a gift: the gift of dying to yourself...and being raised to walk in a new, kingdom life.

But in addition, "Christmas Pickles" is in an invitation to think about the way that pickles get made. Now I'm no expert on the subject...but I do have it on pretty good authority - that if you wanna make a pickle - you need to take a cucumber...and you need to make a brine for soaking the cucumber...and then you need to let it soak.

- Because if you all you do is dip the cucumber in the brine and quickly pull it out...then all you end up with is a baptized cucumber.^{iv}
- But if you keep soaking it (maybe we could say, "If you keep baptizing it") it becomes something new.

So which do you wanna be? You wanna be a baptized cucumber—who decided and got dunked and that was the end of it?

- Or do you wanna be a Christmas pickle—who keeps deciding...and who keeps soaking...and who becomes someone new as a result?

May God help us all today—to decide...and to keep deciding—as we get ready - for a visit from Jesus.

ⁱ Doug Mendenhall, "Getting Prepared for the Arrival of Jesus," www.reporternews.com (9-24-09); submitted by Kevin Miller, executive vice president, Christianity Today International.

ⁱⁱ A.W. Tozer, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 32, no. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Jensen, *Touched by the Spirit* (p. 49). Cited by Brian P. Stoffregen at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt3x1.htm>.

^{iv} Image adapted from James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (IVP Books, 2009), p. 185.