

## Signs: An Urgent Warning – Matthew 3:1-12

In different ways, we all know the importance of signs and symbols. They point us in the right direction, give us instruction, and help us avoid making mistakes. We might be washing our clothes, and looking at the label inside to tell us what temperature to wash our favorite shirt or blouse at, and whether or not to iron it. We might be driving our car, and following road-signs that tell us what route to take, or whether or not we are allowed to park. If we DON'T follow instructions, the results can be annoying, like when our shirt shrinks or fades, or when we get lost in our car. Or signs can warn us to help us stay safe or avoid disaster...Take a look at some warning signs... Signs and symbols are important to us in our lives.

In our lives of faith, signs and symbols are important too. As we reflect upon God's Word, we see how the Old and New Testaments SHOW US WAYS by which God wants us to live our lives. God, through the writers, gives us signs of direction, signs of instruction and signs of warning to stay close to Jesus and stay alert so not to miss something of great importance.

In our Gospel reading today, John the Baptist was not out in the wilderness pursuing fame or fortune. He was not seeking public office or popularity. He was an "equal opportunity" critic – every segment of the Jewish population was called to repentance. John was calling for a complete change in life style. In some ways John is like the modern corporate or government whistle-blower. Whistle-blowers are not popular as they expose corruption, unmask lies and tell the truth.

Repentance is an about face from sinful behavior. It is a return to imitating Jesus. It is more than feeling bad about something we've done. It is being different. As we turn around, our minds are changed, our vision corrected. As John was crying "Repent" – he points to the Messiah, reminding us that "Jesus has come, not so you can feel different but so you can be different. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!

As curious people arrived at the Jordan River, John directs his attention to those who felt their religious pedigree would be sufficient on the Day of Judgment. It is not enough to follow in the footsteps of a long line of religious ancestors. One translation paraphrases John's message this way. "Don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as your father. Children of Abraham are a dime a dozen ... What counts is your life behavior. Is it green and blossoming?" God is not interested in your religious blood line. What God wants are the fruits that come from repentance.

The message of John is talking about our relationship with God. If we are to have peace with God, it must begin with repentance. Our repentance must then result in godly behavior. As Paul writes: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which he prepared in advance for us to do."

One of the most terrible aspects of sin is that it cuts us off from God and one another. Our highest destiny, our deepest desire, is to know and worship God. We want to know Jesus.

But this God, whom we seek to know, is a righteous God, perfect and sinless. The Bible says that God is holy and in Him there is no darkness at all. "If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth." I John 1:7-8

The Pharisees and Sadducees liked to look religious but God knew their heart. He knows our sin, the things we did wrong this week, the offenses we gave, the words we used, the things left undone, the evil thoughts that would move us toward evil actions.

If we are going to take God's call to repentance seriously during this Advent season and in every season, then we need to ask ourselves some serious questions:

- 1) Have I neglected my home or family duties?
- 2) Have I been lazy, neglectful, easily distracted from time with God?
- 3) Have I misused God's name?

- 4) Have I missed worship by my own choice?
- 5) Have I caused another to sin?
- 6) Have I disobeyed my parents?
- 7) Have I been greedy with God's blessings? Proud? Jealous?
- 8) Have I neglected the care for the poor and needy?

John's message of repentance at the Jordan river, still reverberates across the centuries. His words are signs along the way ... on our journey toward the manger. Repent, turn back towards God. Look! Here stands Jesus, the lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world.

This Jesus, the son of Mary, son of a Galilean carpenter, a man who came from an unimportant village, but was in reality "the visible presence of the invisible God." He would bring healing to the sick. He took upon himself the sins of all people (objective justification.) The cross of Jesus then invites each of us to accept his sacrificial death as payment for our sinful behavior (subjective justification).

The good news of the cross of Jesus, verified by the Easter resurrection of Jesus from death and the grave is well known by us. As Christians we know the good news. Paul phrases it well. " We have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. You see, just at the right time, when we were powerless, Christ died for the ungodly "(Romans 5:1,6). "The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life."

John's message is a sign along the way towards the manger. It is an urgent warning....not for the neighbor next door, not for the person across the aisle. It is a call to each of us to walk down the river bank and stand in the water of baptism, partake of his holy sacrament, and then let the risen Christ live through us.

Two carpenters work their whole career for a developer. Each of them builds hundreds of homes, all to the highest of quality providing shelter for families all over their county. On their last month of work, their developer gives them each one last job. Each one is to build a house for a "special client" on a larger than average lot in one of the best developments owned by the developer. The first carpenter, hands aching from arthritis, back barely holding together from years of labor decides to build his best home ever. He chooses all the best materials and takes extra time to make sure every nail is in its proper place. The second carpenter, also aching and sore, decides to finish the job as quickly as possible. He uses low grade materials that take less time to procure and prepare. He takes significant short cuts that, while legal, will shorten time between major maintenance issues. On their last day of work, the developer throws them a wonderful retirement party. All of their friends and families are there to celebrate their years of hard work. To each, he gives a box with a set of keys. "For your years of hard and faithful work, I would like to thank you with the keys to the home I asked you to build for my "special clients. May you know enjoy the fruit of your labor in your retirement years."

How are you taking care of the spiritual house God has given you in Christ – going through the motions, or giving Him your best? This is John the Baptist's message for us at Advent-time, giving us a sign to be ready for Jesus' advent ('coming'). This sign shows us the need to continue our Advent self-examination, prayer and spiritual discipline; cleansing our hearts, minds and spirits of all that hinders our relationship with God. Advent is to be a time of 'turning back' to God; acknowledging how we 'fall short' of what He expects from us, his children.

For the Good News has come to us in Christ Jesus, as long foretold and expected by the prophets of old: Jesus has come and will come again to guide us along the road of truth and life in all its fullness, the way that points to God and His Kingdom. The Christ will come, so let us prepare, make ready for his Advent, as He once came and will come again; and let us be alert to see the signs that point us towards the arrival of the long-expected One – even amid all the hectic activity as we prepare to celebrate his birth! Are you heeding the signs? In Jesus. Amen.