

God's Revolution:
A Radical Reading of Scripture for Refugees from False Religion

Second Sunday in Advent: December 8, 2019

Matthew 3: The Divine Slash and Burn

"Repent and change, for the Kingdom of Heaven is here now! Prepare a clear way for God and remove all obstacles; for the axe is already chopping and the dead wood is being thrown into the fire!"

The local west coast people called him Crazy Charlie. He was a Coast Salish Indian who lived years ago as a hermit in the wilderness of Valdez Island. At nights, Charlie would creep through the dense underbrush and cut down old growth cedar trees with a chainsaw, and then pile them up and put them to the torch. That went on a few years until the Mounties caught up with him and put him where so many of his people end up. The cops claimed that the Indian was an ex-logger and a psycho, but nobody ever heard from Charlie himself why he was so determined to chop down and burn the forest.

I thought about Charlie and his people when I read today's Gospel reading of John the Baptist announcing the coming of Christ. That tale, like the lives of native people, fits last week's Biblical message of the sudden ending of one world and the beginning of another. For that's exactly what happened to west coast indigenous people in barely fifty years. Most of their society was wiped out that quickly by our churches, our germ warfare and our cannon fire, leaving refugees like Crazy Charlie to stumble through the ruins.

In today's Gospel lesson, a similar ending is announced by a guy like Charlie - a lonely hermit and refugee from society who's on a mission: a man who we know as John the Baptist.

John hung out in the wilderness, on the margins of society, just like Charlie, because that's the only place where divine truth can be heard: the babble of the city is never a home for prophets. And there in the freedom of space, John tells his listeners that the ending of all that they know has begun. If they want to survive what's happening, they'll have to change their ways now. They'll have to repent, which means clearing away and bringing down everything inside and outside of themselves that stands in the way of the new world called the Kingdom of Heaven. It also means welcoming the one who is inaugurating that new world: a man named Jesus the Christ.

"Repent" is a very significant word in scripture. It's in fact the first word spoken in the Gospels, the first directive and exhortation given in Jesus' work. Repentance sets the tone for all of

Jesus' subsequent teachings. It's precisely like the first words spoken in an exorcism, when the evil spirit is named and ordered to stop what it's doing. In the same way, the possession of our minds and lives by an anti-God world spirit must first be broken and walked away from for any kind of change to be possible. That's in fact the way that the earliest Christians saw their baptisms: as a spiritual cleansing and exorcism that permanently separated them from a Satanic world and made them citizens of heaven.

But what does the word "repent" mean? That depends whether you read Greek or Hebrew. Greek is the language of the New Testament, and it understands repentance as a change in one's philosophical attitude, as in, "I was wrong, I need to look at things differently". Repentance in Greek is *metanoiste*, and it simply means to think differently. But in Hebrew, to repent is to do something radically different. The Hebrew word for repent, *shuba*, means to walk away from something in a new direction: to be different. And so, while the words of John the Baptist have come down to us through the Greek language, the spirit and meaning behind his words, like Jesus' own words, are thoroughly Hebrew. John is calling people to action, to live radically different lives, since a new world has already begun among them.

So what then are people supposed to do, according to John the Baptist? The complete Greek translation of his words advises this:

"Clear a way for God and make his path straight and righteous. Remove every obstacle to God in order to make his presence and way possible".

In other words, the new world has arrived but to receive it and to help make it possible, we must remove anything that is blocking or preventing it, in ourselves and in the world. That is what repenting looks like in practice.

But this call to change by John to his listeners is just the preamble to a bigger drama. What becomes obvious as the story in Matthew 3 unfolds is that the real decisive action is coming from God. We must step out of the clutter and blockages in our lives, but only in order to receive the transformation that God is establishing. God is the author and creator of the new world, not we by ourselves, even though we are partners with God in the effort. In other words, heaven has launched a revolution and everything not of God is coming down. Therefore, it's time for each of us to make a choice because there's no middle ground.

As John proclaims,

"The axe is already laid to the root of the trees and every tree that does not bring forth good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire".

This cataclysmic language of a divine slashing and burning only intensifies when Jesus himself enters the story. According to John, the Christ will "baptize you with fire and the holy spirit ... he will make clean his threshing floor, gather the wheat into the barn and burn up the chaff with an unquenchable fire."

In other words, Christ and the new world that is here now is separating people, gathering God's chosen ones together while destroying the others like so much refuse. That's a process that the people of Jesus' time could understand, since as peasants they slashed and burned their crops to replenish the earth and survive. From out of that burning came renewed life. As in nature, so in heaven.

This Biblical account in Matthew is a life and death language, of conflict and separation and ending. It represents the hard truth of how genuine change occurs: the old must be purged for the new to arise. But ironically that's not the kind of message that's either palatable or understandable to many of us, especially if we're fed on the spiritual pablum and false words of Official Christianity, that seeks to bolster and maintain our worldly lives. And so not surprisingly, and just like last week's Gospel message, once again the Christian church's artificial contrivance called the weekly Lectionary has stepped in to edit and gut today's reading. This Sunday's Christian congregations will not hear all of Matthew chapter 3, but only the part up to verse 12. The finale to the chapter, from verses 13 to 17, has been cut out.

Now this is very odd, since these last verses are a vital part of the story, perhaps the most vital part. For they describe the baptism of Jesus himself and his adoption by God:

"And when Jesus was baptized by John the heavens were opened unto him and John saw the spirit of God descend like a dove upon Jesus, and a voice came from heaven, saying 'This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.' "

In truth, all of John the Baptist's words until then are a prelude to and the reason for this foundation event, when Jesus the man is claimed and named by God as the Christ: the first of the chosen remnant who will comprise the new "Kingdom of Heaven" or "Realm of Eternity". But the church lectionary has cut all of this out. Now why would it do that? Very simple: because the church hierarchy has always been threatened by the true Biblical message, which is one of liberation from below, not conformity imposed from above.

"God has filled the hungry with good things and has sent the rich away empty"; "Blessed are those who are poor now, for they shall be satisfied; but woe unto those who are rich, for they have been satisfied"; "What you do to the least of my people, you do to me". In these words of Jesus, the same spirit of liberation that broke the chains of Hebrew slaves and destroyed

Pharaoh's armies speaks of God's plan of a new society where there is no high or low, no rich or poor, but one community of equality and love. Or as John the Baptist said, "God will even all the rough places, and every mountain will be brought low so that all mankind may see the glory of God as one". This complete equality is what the first Christian communities embodied, as Paul describes in the Book of Acts, when he writes, "And all those who were in Christ were of one mind and heart. They claimed nothing for themselves but held all their possessions in common, so there were no poor persons among them". That is repentance and love in practice. The true Gospels and mind of God always bend towards human liberation.

Who would such a liberating God choose as his beloved son but one who was born in poverty, the child of a scandalized unwed mother: the poor, landless peasant named Yeshua or Jesus? Not a king or a rich favored son, but one plucked anonymously from the crowd?

Quite simply, if I had have uttered this same claim a few centuries ago – namely, that Jesus wasn't born divine but was a poor peasant adopted by God and appointed as the first of a new line of humanity – frankly, I would have been handed a one way trip to an Inquisition barbeque. Because then or now, what terrifies religious potentates is the message that the poor are chosen by God, that God is the sovereign maker of history and social change, that God is an active force in our lives and can raise even the most destitute man or woman to glory. That fact does away with any need for wealthy churches or sacraments or doctrine, or for so-called popes or bishops or priests who falsely pretend to speak for God and mediate truth to the rest of us. The church has substituted itself for God and so must deny God's real presence in practice. But as John the Baptist proclaims and reminds us, God is present, here and now. And God is breaking open a new pathway for the pure of heart by cutting down everything that is rotten and dead and throwing all of it into a fire of judgement.

I had a remarkable experience of that power some years ago, in the company of people like Charlie, our Valdez Island tree cutter. The incident took place, ironically, in a big catholic cathedral in downtown Vancouver. And what happened there made history and changed history, thanks to God.

There were fifty of us outside the church that Sunday morning in March of 2008. Most of us were native men and women who had endured torture and worse at what the killers still call Indian residential schools. We were there in the spirit of many children who were murdered at the hands of the Church of Rome and buried in secret. We were there to demand their remains back, and to name those who killed them and were still killing children.

I knew a hidden hand was at work that morning when the gang of church thugs and Vancouver cops who normally guarded the front church entrance were all absent. To paraphrase John the Baptist, the path had definitely been cleared and the obstacles removed that morning! I felt that same hidden hand guide me and the fifty others into the yawning mouth of the cathedral door. And then that force swept us into the cluttered church where people sang hymns to what they thought was God. We hoisted our banner that read "All the Children Need a Proper Burial" and turned to face the congregation. The priests were dumb struck and immobilized. And in the power of truth we began to speak to them about their church's crimes and the dead thing they inhabited that needed to be brought down.

And sure enough, the church did come down. I felt it that day in Holy Rosary Cathedral, like a rotten tree falling to the ground. The criminals buckled quickly after that. The next week, after our occupation of the cathedral made headlines across Canada, the government announced an inquiry into missing residential school children and eventually a so-called truth and reconciliation commission. But even those duplicitous attempts at official containment and cover up failed. The truth was finally known, for like in any exorcism, the evil spirit had been named for what it is. And ever since then, the false child-killing Christian churches have been exposed for what they are. Everywhere they are losing their credibility and collapsing – like chaff being separated and burned in a huge fire of judgement.

On that Sunday in March of 2008, a crowd of impoverished Indians imbued with the truth cleared the way for God to bring down the oldest lie on our planet. The hand of God was with us that day, toppling the mighty from their thrones and filling the righteous poor with a new spirit. That same holy spirit that adopted Jesus continues to reverberate and grow and open new pathways to the realm of eternity that is among us, working to discard and destroy the old corruption.

That divine separation is upon us now. Its presence terrifies those who are chaff and gives hope to the ones who are the good wheat. Jesus says later in the Gospels that he did not come to bring peace to humanity but instead, a sword of judgement, to divide people and set them against each other, and to light a fire on the earth. That's what the truth always does: in a family, in a church, and in the world. It consumes all of our lies and crimes in the fire of a higher love that midwives a new world into being. But so few of us are willing to repent from this present world of death and suffer such division, the loss of friends and loved ones, and the inevitable persecution and crucifixion, simply for that love, and for the truth. Many of us are called to that purpose but few can do God's will. But those few who can and do are the seeds of the new world. And God knows and protects his own.

Is it really possible? Can heaven reach out even to you and me and ask us to be part of this transformation, just as Jesus asked John to baptize him and help join God with mankind? Will we hesitate and disbelieve such an invitation, as John did at first? Or will we welcome the great fire that destroys and creates? The choice is yours. But make it now. For the way of God has arrived.

For the Statement of Faith of The Covenanters see *Here We Stand: The Call of the New Protestant Reformation* at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1974273474>

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