

“Here He Is Again!”

- I. Introduction: Once a year our gospel readings in Advent feature the odd and strident fellow, John the Baptist. John is considered the forerunner of Jesus, the Son of God. Shortly after Jesus appeared and began his ministry, John was executed and became a transitional figure who had set the stage for Jesus’ arrival. John the Baptist spoke with a powerful voice. His words in today’s gospel contain two distinct messages: first he calls for repentance, and next he reassures the people that through Christ the whole landscape will change. The ups and downs of the journey back home to the promised land will be leveled and the path straightened. God will protect and care for God’s people on their way home – then and now. The Lord, John promised, will change the contours of their and our lives.

- II. But, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer would write some 1900 years later, there is a cost of discipleship that cannot be avoided if our decision to follow Christ is to have depth. So let’s tackle the Baptist’s message to us this morning. John is calling us to repentance. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means “a change of mind or heart” or “a turning around.” John and Jesus both began their ministries with calls to repentance. I’m sure you have noticed that the notion of repentance has lost much of its currency in the modern world. Our culture emphasizes the importance of being in touch with our inner desires and pursuing what each of us wishes to do. Self-esteem has been elevated in importance while taking responsibility for one’s own actions has been diluted. As this way of thinking has infused our theology and our worship, the idea of “sin” has become murky and unclear. Just think, how many sermons have you heard that emphasize sin?

One of my most important insights in seminary was that sin actually does exist, and that I, and all of us, will struggle with sin our entire lives. In fact, my third year sermon dealt with this new understanding I had learned about sin. You see, I had grown up being taught that we are all “sinners in the hands of an angry God” and if we weren’t careful God was going to exact some kind of vengeance on us. I had rejected that theology and for years in what I would describe as my “time of being lost in the

wilderness,” I actively worked to escape such a judging and vengeful God. What allowed me in seminary to accept the belief that sin exists and that I need to repent from my sin, came from a new comprehension of what sin really is.

As Kenneth Leech writes in his book *True Prayer* (1995), “To be in a state of sin is to be separated – from God, from others, and from oneself. Through sin the face of God is obscured . . . This lack of knowledge is shown in the lack of mercy and compassion in human society.” What I came to understand was that sin grows out of an obsessive and primary focus upon oneself – one’s goals, one’s desires, even one’s aspirations, to the exclusion of God’s presence. Sin can ultimately have disastrous effects. That is why John the Baptist was calling the people to repentance – because he knew that unless they experienced a “change of heart and mind” they would be closed to the coming of Jesus. Our sinful self-absorption, whether as a person, a church, or a culture has the potential to prevent us from recognizing and following Christ.

This week I had a conversation with an Episcopal priest in California whose name is Rob Gieselmann. Our conversation was about a parishioner we both know, and we were talking at the parishioner’s request. Rob came from Ascension, was ordained a priest in the Diocese of East Tennessee, and had his first church in Cleveland, TN. He was married at Ascension and has a long history here. Following our conversation I decided to read a short book he has written entitled *The Episcopal Call to Love*, published in 2008. I hope this book might be helpful in later discussions we will have at Ascension. In his book he quotes Frederick Beuchner on the topic of sin. He writes: “Frederick Beuchner brings the concept of sin into the twenty-first century. The power of sin is centrifugal. When at work in human life, it tends to push everything out toward the periphery. Bits and pieces go flying off until only the core is left. Eventually bits and pieces of the core itself go flying off until in the end nothing at all is left. ‘The wages of sin is death’ is Paul’s way of saying the same thing. Sin, Beuchner continues, is the very thing that pushes you away from God, the world, society, nature. It widens the gap, he says, even the gaps within yourself.” (pp. 55-56). In contrast the presence of Christ brings unity and wholeness.

III. The message of John the Baptist and the message I hope we receive this morning, is one of love and hope. Today the Baptist quotes Isaiah 40:3-5. This passage refers to the hope the exiled Jews have about returning home, and God’s promise to protect them and care for them on their journey back to Jerusalem. The valleys will be filled and the hills leveled. When we had our pilgrimage in Spain, the level parts of the path

along the Way of St. James were a joy, a time to slow down the heart and let the muscles relax after a climb up one of the steep hills. The Baptist is clear about his role. He is to challenge the people to repentance – to metanoia so that they can receive Christ and experience that with Christ, the hills and valleys become level and the path is easier. John wanted the people to understand that it is Christ who will guide them fully on their life journey home. And it is Christ who has guided every generation of Christians since. As you might remember, the early Christians were first called “The People of the Way.” We are and always have been a people on a journey home, a pilgrimage that is meant to open our eyes and hearts and minds and souls increasingly to the transforming presence of Christ.

How are we transformed, you might ask? The darkness of sin that can confuse us about where God is and how to lead our lives is dispelled by the light of Christ. The light penetrates the darkness when metanoia, our change of heart and mind, opens the space for Christ to enter. There is a well-known English painting of Christ standing at a door. It looks as if he would like to enter, but the door has no handle on the outside. It can only be opened from within. When Christ enters, I believe two closely related powerful changes occur. Call it conversion if you like. First, there is a union with God that is ever so gentle, yet ever so powerful. And second, out of that union with God the core potential we have for love is catalyzed. Love is converted into action.

This is the thesis of Gieselmann’s book – our union with Christ permits us to have deeper communion with one another and allows us to love one another in tangible and new ways. People that we may not have been drawn to, become loved as other pilgrims on our journey. We become enthusiastic Christians and are deeply motivated to give of ourselves to others. We are seeing this in the outpouring of love from Ascension to a small church in Bolivia. When our deep desire to love is unlocked, we are able to care for others with generosity and excitement. With this generosity we will take every one of the gift cards off the tree in our foyer; we will fill the box in the office area with gifts for the patients at Lakeshore; and we will support FISH in their Christmas card ministry. We will find ourselves praying for the folks who are struggling among us, like the four-month old baby at Children’s whose heart rate is not stabilizing; the long-term member who has had a health crisis this week, or those among us and around us who can’t find jobs and can’t pay their utility bills. And we will be eager to begin new outreach ministries. We will jump at opportunities such as prison ministry, working with immigrant families, and helping build suitable housing. We

will feel the power of the love within us so clearly that will want to invite others to worship with us and to attend the Alpha course. We may find ourselves offering to attend the course with them. Metanoia, repentance, will open our hearts, minds, and souls to new possibilities. Metanoia will turn our minds away from conflict and will deeply re-enforce our humility about the things we don't understand. We will continue to become a new people, and others will know us at Ascension by how powerfully we love. *Amen.*