

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“Prepare the Way: Turn”**  
**Matthew 3: 1-12**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent**  
**December 4, 2016**

What if instead of asking people to have *less* commercialism, less gluttony, less greed this Christmas, preachers invited those to whom they preach to have *more*...that is, more peace, more joy, more grace? What if, during Advent, preachers were to invite people to dream bigger dreams and hope grander hopes? (1)

These are the questions with which David Lose, a preaching professor whose writings I often find insightful, challenged other preachers for whom he was writing.

On the surface, it would seem that the preacher about whom we are reading in today’s Scripture lesson, John the Baptist, is screaming at people about doing with less. I invite you to listen beneath the surface, however. Listen for how he is inviting his first-century hearers and us to experience more peace, more joy, more grace, to dream bigger dreams and hope grander hopes.

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If I were to ask you to make a list of things that your mother told you when you were a kid (or, if you are a kid now, is still telling you), what would be on your list?

How about...

Beds aren’t made for jumping on!

Always wear clean underwear because, after all, you may be in an accident!

My favorite is something that Jane Cain’s mother told her. I love it, and it’s joined my own list of mom-isms: Take the pie when it’s passed!

And perhaps the most universal of the “things that mothers say”: If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.

I have no way of knowing, of course, what advice John the Baptist’s mother Elizabeth may have given him. (Matthew doesn’t mention John’s mother at all. Luke does, telling us her name was Elizabeth and that she was older than the average first-century mom.) What I do know is that if she told him, “If you can’t say something nice about the Pharisees and Sadducees, don’t say anything at all,” he definitely ignored her. (From Matthew’s description of his attire, we can probably guess that his underwear wasn’t all that clean either!)

John the Baptist wasn’t known for saying nice things.

He was not known for saying nice things nor for saying nothing at all, but every single gospel writer begins his account of Jesus by placing John on the main stage. And while a search of the greeting card racks of your local Hallmark

store for a Christmas card featuring John the Baptist will be in vain, he nevertheless explodes off the pages of the gospel lessons prescribed by the lectionary to be read during the season of Advent.

John's words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," strike our twenty-first eardrums with a sound as violent as the crack of a handgun fired at close range. The word "repent" conjures up pulpit pounding, tent-revival preachers, not angelic choirs singing tidings of comfort and joy. But the word that is translated as "repent" does not mean throwing off the soggy blanket of guilt about one's past lest one spend eternity writhing in the fiery flames of hell. Repentance means "turning." It means a basic reorientation of one's life *in this life*. In repentance, one turns from one framework of meaning to another, from one way of thinking about self, others, God, and life to another competing and compelling vision. (2)

Now, if John had only cried out, "Repent," expecting people to discard their old ways of thinking and doing based solely on that one word, he would have been wasting his breath. People do not simply turn away from one way of life; they are led to turn when they perceive that there is something deeper and truer *toward which* they can turn. John gives that reason....and indeed Jesus does too, for Jesus's first sermon as recounted by Matthew in Matthew 4: 17 consists of the exact same words—*the exact same words*—as John's: the kingdom of heaven has come near. (Matthew uses the term "kingdom of heaven" because no righteous Jew would say God's name aloud, but it is equivalent to the term "kingdom of God.")

The nearness of the kingdom in Jesus is nothing less than the total healing of the cosmos. It is nothing less than grace, joy, and peace becoming everyday reality in this life. It is nothing less than being given the gift of dreaming bigger dreams and hoping grander hopes.

It is the best possible news, and that is why John can't be bound by the advice that if you can't say something nice, don't say it at all. He has to speak out truth, and we, following his example, are called to speak truth, and, as Matthew makes clear as he shares this story, we must confess our sin.

Tom Long, writing in his commentary on Matthew, takes the thread of John's sermon in the wilderness of Judea and pulls it forward to the present-day. He writes of how we are to speak truth and confess present-day sin, specifically the sin of our racism.

He writes, "Racism is a sin that infects us all. Confessing the sin of racism is much more than admitting that one has shown prejudice toward others or told jokes at the expense of another race. It means admitting that the entire framework of racism—the view that another race is somehow inferior or basically flawed—is wrong and evil. Repentance means turning away from that worldview and toward [God's own kingdom] vision of all races as cherished and valued in the eyes of God." (3)

Here is a snapshot of what it looks like to confess such sin.

I read this past week a reflection by Michael Anthony of an experience that he had on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. He was where you never want to be on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving: the grocery store check-out line. There was literally a 45 minute or so wait, and he was more or less parked by the magazines with their lurid headlines.

Everyone was keeping to themselves mostly, except....behind Michael stood a man, the personification of privilege. He was a total stranger to Michael, but he elbowed Michael, pointed to one of the covers and bellowed a loud, racist remark.

Michael looked around. Everybody has heard the man. Not only those in his aisle, but in the aisles on both sides. They grimace. And then they look down. Men, women, black, white. Everybody in three check-out lines looking down at the floor.

Michael was looking down too. Suddenly a memory of something that happened when he was six years old flashed through his mind. A family member once owned a home that was part of the Underground Railroad. "We'd sit behind this concrete slab under their deck and talk about what happened here. Even as a young white boy, I said that I would die before I let that kind of open hate live in my world. I made the same resolution when I learned about the Holocaust. And I felt that same fire now...in the grocery store."

"I found myself, like everyone else, looking down...but I couldn't continue to do that."

He was shaking, but he spoke. "I'm sorry, everyone, but I must ask for some support in addressing this hateful and ignorant man. Look up, please. Someone look up, because I can't do this alone."

People began to look up. Michael began to cry. He couldn't stop, but he kept speaking, "Those comments are inappropriate and I will not allow them in my world."

By the time that the man said, "Hey, dude. Calm down. I wasn't talking about you," everybody was looking up. And then they started clapping. Eventually, the man got quiet and looked down. Now everybody in three check-out lines were all looking up. Now this one man...he was the one looking down.

And immediately, everyone began talking. Not about him, but about the holidays. Joyous. Laughing. And it wasn't out of embarrassment or to pretend what happened didn't just happen...But it was because we were instantly bonded in their weird but beautiful way.

Michael Anthony concluded his little essay, "Together, we silenced ignorant hate. We made the choice to look up...I was overwhelmed with emotion and fear before I decided to speak, but I asked for help... and help came forth, strongly and beautifully."

The kingdom of heaven has come near, my brothers and sisters. Let us turn toward it, every chance that we get. Let us speak the truth of God's kingdom, Christ's kingdom, where there is more...more joy, peace, justice, and grace.

1. David Lose. "Hoping for More," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), December 2, 2013.

2. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 27.

3. *Ibid.*, 28.