

Advent 2, Year C – Baptism of Repentance

Luke 3:1-6

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

There's a meditative technique much used in group settings, and, by the way, increasingly popular in Protestant churches not much given to meditation of any kind, called *Lectio Divina*. It's a method of combining reading of the Scriptures with meditation and prayer. Though it can be accomplished in private, my own experience is that it has been most often used in small group settings as a way of broadening one's understanding of the meanings that might arise from a passage.

The method of *Lectio Divina* involves each person in the group finding a word or phrase in a Bible selection, like the one we heard this morning, both to meditate on and to share with others in the group. In effect, it would be a word or phrase that basically leapt out at the reader – or listener, if the passage has been read aloud.

I'm speaking of *Lectio Divina* in the context of today's Gospel because a phrase did, almost literally, leap out at me – causing me to examine why it should have done so. That phrase is “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

So why *is* that phrase so meaningful to me? As you may recall, before I attended seminary I had retired from a career in California as a Deputy District Attorney. I prosecuted a variety of crimes for a number of years, and then became part of a small team of lawyers that represented abused and neglected children who were being placed under the court's jurisdiction potentially to be removed from their parents' care, at least temporarily, and, in some cases, to be placed permanently with legal guardians or even adoptive parents. Over the twelve years that I had that assignment I represented literally thousands of youngsters, and, especially in cases involving teenagers, I frequently developed real friendships with them.

Two girls in particular became important to me because, alone among the hundreds of teens I got to know, they each, independently, without even knowing one another, wrote me letters in which they referred to me as the father they had never really had. What is especially heartbreaking to me is that, in a strange way, they became sort of like bizarre bookends.

One of them, by the time she was 28, had had three children and three husbands, the last of whom murdered her almost eight years ago. The other, who is now in her early 30s, has been in custody since she shot and killed her 21-year-old ex-boyfriend when she was 16 years old. When I met her, she was in middle school, in a class for gifted children, and was clearly a spunky kid. So spunky was she that shortly before the incident that landed her in prison, she had emancipated herself – that is, had made herself responsible for her support and living arrangements, just as though she were officially an adult.

Although she no longer had a relationship with our court, we remained in touch with one another after her emancipation. I recall getting a call from her one evening asking for advice. She had, she told me, a friend who was being abused by a boyfriend. What would be the advice she should give her friend, she wanted to know. Well, of course I suspected that she was speaking of herself, but I accepted the question in its own terms and advised her to tell her friend what I would tell any girl – or woman – in such a situation. Restraining orders are of little or no value, even if she qualified for one; so tell her, I advised, to consider moving to, say, Kansas City – someplace far, far away. Clearly, if the call really was about herself, my young friend didn't follow that advice, which, as I later found out, would have been an extremely good idea in her case, since the boyfriend actually had a criminal record of torturing animals – some 50 cats and a dog. I think of our own two cats and shudder.

In any event, one day she shot him with a gun she had stolen from her mother. Convicted of second-degree murder, she has spent over 15 years in custody. Recently, a judge annulled the original verdict and granted her a new trial. Unless that trial results in an acquittal, however, or a dramatic reduction in the charge for which she was found guilty, she probably has seven or eight years before she is eligible even to apply for parole, which is not exactly a sure thing – after applying a number of times, Charles Manson, for example, has now given up. Though I surely can't be sad about that development! Why has the court overturned my young friend's conviction so late in the game? Well, the psychologist appointed by the court at her original trial, who had determined at the time that she understood the nature of her act and was therefore culpable, has now a more nuanced understanding of the effects on her at 16 of the equivalent for her of what is generally known as "battered wife syndrome," and there has been a change in state law permitting the jury to hear evidence about it even in cases in which, like hers, there was no marriage, and in which there was a conviction so long ago. Furthermore, there are new insights – you might have read about them in Newsweek awhile back – about the fact that the decision-making process of teenagers is simply not as orderly as it will one day become when they are adults because their brains have not yet completely formed – another explanation, if not defense, for her actions.

She and I have continued a regular correspondence since even before her conviction, despite my affiliation with the office that prosecuted her. And during that time she has, I truly believe, matured to the point that she now realizes that, however understandable her motivation may be in retrospect, what she did was more than wrong. Moving to Kansas City would not have been merely a better choice. She has deprived another human being, not much older than she herself, of the opportunity that she had – to mature in understanding and wisdom – to repent for his sins, as I now believe she has for hers. She has also developed a relationship with a jail chaplain; she regularly takes religious classes; and she has, furthermore, taken a number of college classes, including one in philosophy. Finally, in our letters we have often discussed how important it is for her to view with some abhorrence what she did those years ago, no matter how psychological factors might now seem to diminish her personal responsibility.

Of course, accepting responsibility is not something we readily think of prison inmates doing easily. There's an old legend about Frederick the Great of Prussia visiting a Berlin prison and asking each inmate he met what had caused his incarceration. One at a time the fellow he spoke with would expatiate on the evils of the criminal justice system that had caused an innocent man to wind up in prison. Finally, Frederick came to one who contritely confessed that he actually deserved to be where he was. Frederick turned then to the warden and ordered the man's immediate release. "After all," said he, "we don't want him corrupting the other prisoners, do we?"

Ultimately, the acknowledgment of personal responsibility and repentance are what John was encouraging in today's Gospel for those to whom he offered baptism – which is, after all, a symbolic act of someone washing himself clean – in essence, preparing himself for a new start, however he may have fallen short in the past now behind him. To use a trite example from our modern lives, shaking off the past so as to start fresh is very like an expression you hear with some frequency from athletes, that they simply have to take their endeavors "one game at a time." They are saying that, even if they lost their last contest by a wide margin, it is important for that fact not to color their expectation of what will happen next, for lower expectations will inevitably contribute to less effective performances. To repent is likewise to see things fresh, to believe that you can be a new and far better person – in the context of John's world, to admit that you fell short (which is what the Greek word for sin literally means – it's a term from archery). It is the determination to be a better marksman as you attempt to hit God's target.

This is, of course, the Advent season; so this baptism of John's should also be seen in the context of the coming of our Lord, for it is in *him* that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Repentance by itself is not sufficient for us to hit that mark. Jesus' coming is God's direct involvement in our lives. In effect, in Jesus the Christ he has become one of us. In the words and works of Jesus we see the very nature of God himself. That fresh start that we seek from our repentance is found as we follow where he leads us. So, this Advent season let us, at least symbolically, repent of *our* past sins, and dedicate ourselves, as we follow him, to become ever more the image of God in which we have been made.

AMEN