

Wow!
Luke 3:1-6
December 6, 2009—Covenant Presbyterian
The Rev. Catherine Robinson

Every year,
 John the Baptist
 strides onto the Advent scene
 right when
 most of us are waking up
 and saying,
 "Oh dear!
 It's really coming, isn't it?
 How many weeks are left?"

There are cards to be written,
 goodies to be baked,
 gifts to be bought
 performances to prepare and attend.

And I don't know if this is true for you,
 but at our house,
 there always seems to be more mess
 at this time of the year.

I *want* everything to be
 clean and bright and sparkly
 during this season.
 But that's just not the way it is.

There are so many other things to do
 that dishes seem to stack up
 even more than usual.

And when wonderful things to eat
 or other special gifts
 arrive in the mail,
 somehow the packing material
 seems to multiply.
 There's just always a mess!

Well, do you know what
 I do about that?
 I have a great solution!
 I just open the latest box
 of nuts or candy
 that arrived in the mail
 and I dig right in!!!

So, in the middle of all of this preparing,
 here is John the Baptist...
 and he's
 standing out in the wilderness
 by the River Jordan,
 shouting (appropriately),

"Prepare the way of the Lord!"
 But how does he want us to prepare?
 "Repent!" he says.
 Turn around!
 Clean up your act!

A couple of years ago,

I suggested a new decoration for this time of the year—
 the John the Baptist figurine
 complete with motion detector,
 and computer chip,
 and a little speaker in it.
 It could be placed by the cookie plate,
 so that every time you got near it,
 it would shout,
 "Repent!"

I guess Hallmark would never go for it...
 but Weight Watchers might!

Why are there no recipes
 in the December women's magazines
 for locusts and wild honey?

I double-dog dare you...

No, I triple-dog dare you...

No, I quadruple-dog dare someone

to serve locusts and wild honey

at the Progressive Dinner

next weekend.

Why does no one market camel's hair sweaters
 to buy for your sweetie?

(Seth thought of that one!)

Why don't we get John the Baptist
 cards in the mail during December?

Okay, I'll quit....

I'm telling you, though,

that the possibilities are endless!

Somehow, I doubt that

I'll ever get a John the Baptist greeting card
 during December...

(although I'm waiting!)

And I would be very surprised

if *Women's Day* magazine

ever publishes a recipe in its December issue

for locusts and wild honey.

John the Baptist is just

way too weird

for the way our culture

does December.

And besides,

who's in the mood to repent

during December?
 Save it for January, John!
 Or even better,
 let's just wait for Lent!

What pictures

does the word "repent"
 conjure up in your mind?
 I see a shady evangelist,
 slightly overweight,
 hair pasted down just so,
 his finger pointed straight at the congregation,
 his voice raised to full volume,
 (I'm not going to try to do it myself
 since I'm not a shady evangelist!)—
 "Repent!" he shouts.

Or I see a huge billboard
 on a Texas freeway
 (Texas,
 because that's where I grew up
 and spent a lot of years
 and because everything's bigger in Texas!)—
 maybe it's got a black background
 and big white letters,
 or drippy bloody red letters—
 "Repent!" it says.

And then, underneath
 it has a quote from the Bible,
 maybe about the Lord returning
 like a thief in the night.

And then, there's the name of a church.
 (That just really makes you
 want to go to church, doesn't it?)

As I've indicated,
 I also happen to have the word "repent"
 associated in my mind
 with feeling really guilty about eating
 excessive amounts
 of saturated fats
 and processed sugar.

Repent.

It's about hellfire and brimstone,
 and being sorry for the ways
 we have messed up
 and ruined everything
 and offended God
 and can't fit into our clothes anymore
 (or whatever else we've done)
 and aren't we bad people!

Repenting has to do
 with walking down the sawdust trail,
 and with fear about what will happen
 if we don't.

We imagine that repenting is all about
 being sorry for the past and
 worrying about the future.

But none of that
 is what John the Baptist
 had in mind when he stood by the river
 calling people to repent.

Repenting *is* about turning around
 and going another direction.

It's about
 a change of heart,
 a change of mind,
 a change of direction,
 but it's not because
 we're afraid of the future.

It's because
 we've glimpsed new possibilities
 for the future.

My favorite definition of repentance
 comes from Frederick Buechner.

Buechner says,
 "To repent
 is to come to your senses....
 True repentance
 spends less time
 looking at the past
 and saying 'I'm sorry'
 than it spends
 looking at the future
 and saying, 'Wow!'"

(*Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC*, rev., San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993 p. 96)

Looking at the future
 and saying "Wow!"
Well, how cool is that?!

My goodness!
 That almost makes repentance sound fun!

Test this and see if you agree—
 Excitement about the future
 is the *only* good reason
 to change.

Changing our behavior because we're afraid
 may work for a while,
 but eventually,
 it backfires.

We may change, all right,
 but then,
 we're walking around living in fear.
 And fear
 brings its own kind of misery.

Excitement about the future
 is the only good reason
 to change.

When we receive, by the grace of God,
 some glimpse of a future
 that is filled with more freedom,
 and more love,
 and more hope,
 and more joy
 than we
 and others in the world
 now know,
 we want to move
 toward that future.

And that is when we end up repenting...
 because we realize that
 God isn't finished with us yet.
 God hasn't finished moving us
 toward the glorious future that
 God has in mind for us
 and for all of creation.

Maybe repentance does mean changing
 some of our eating habits,
 or that we exercise more—
 in order to live
 the life we have
 as fully as possible;
 or, in order to use less
 so that others
 may have more.

That's living into God's glorious future.
 Wow!

But maybe what we begin to change
 is our tendency to beat up on ourselves.
 We change our tendency
 to see ourselves as less
 than God created us to be,
 and we turn toward a life of noticing God's good gifts,
 and practicing the scales of rejoicing.
 That's living into God's glorious future.
 Wow!

Maybe we repent
 when we realize we've been given a great gift—

when the doctor says the tests are clear,
 when some financial windfall happens
 (not often these days,
 but it may happen sometimes!),
 when the grade on the exam encourages us
 in a very important way.
 New possibilities open up before us
 and we change the way we see ourselves.
 That's living into God's glorious future."
 Wow!

We don't just repent once
 and we're done with it.
 We do it over and over and over again—
 changing our hearts and minds and lives—
 turning toward God's glorious future.
 Daily, or at least weekly,
 we let go of old destructive ways
 and turn toward God's glorious future!
 Wow!

We gather as a community,
 and we have that whole sequence,
 every Sunday,
 of confession,
 of assurance of pardon,
 and of response to pardon.

Think of that response to pardon—
 when we sing "Gloria in excelsis deo" during Advent—
 that's the "Wow!"
 That's the looking ahead in celebration.

We do it over and over and over again—
 remembering that, no matter what,
 we always have a future in the love of God.

Repent!
 It's not about looking
 at the past
 and saying "I'm sorry."

It's about looking
 at the future
 and saying "Wow!"

Well, when you think about it that way,
 John the Baptist decorations in December
 might not be such a bad idea after all.

Prepare the way of the Lord!
 Repent!
 Wow!