

Coming Near

Matthew 3:1-12

November 26, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

Perhaps you can remember something like this, without shuddering. “A train is going from El Paso to Houston, traveling at 42 miles per hour, and another train is running on parallel tracks from Houston to El Palso, traveling at 57 miles per hour. Where will they meet?” I’m not going to solve it for you, but keep this image in your mind, of two trains approaching each other, getting nearer and nearer by the minute. They aren’t heading toward a catastrophe, or really heading toward anything except each other.

Anna’s birthday is in October, and Rachel’s is in January. In my mind, they’re always two years apart in age, so I’ve caught myself more than once going ahead and adding the year to Rachel’s age as soon as Anna’s birthday has past. So in November, I’ll say, oh, our kids are 16 and 14, when they’re really 16 and still 13. I hadn’t realized it, but Andy does the same thing. Rachel caught him at it a couple of weeks ago. “Daddy just said I’m 14,” she whispered to me, “Doesn’t he realize I’m still 13?” Yes, he does know she’s 13, but he must make the same adjustment I do. Fourteen is near, coming closer and closer, and the years seem to go so quickly anyway, that it’s as if she is 14 already. Fourteen is coming near and is almost here. Her birthday is coming near, and it’s so close it has already started to change how we think of her.

We humans act similarly all the time. It’s part of how we cope with change. We imagine it to already be here. We work our way through changes, good and bad, we think through and sometimes act through, what it will be like, when the new reality is here. Sometimes that’s painful, and psychology has a fancy name for it: anticipatory grief, which is grieving before our loved one has died. People whose loved ones have dementia or Alzheimer’s know this process all too well. The grief is a slow-moving train, the absence coming nearer and nearer day by day. But we enact this anticipation with changes we’re excited about, too. Starting a new job? We imagine the new commute to the new location, we imagine getting to know our new co-workers, tackling new projects and challenges. We imagine the future, and imagine ourselves in the future that is coming near, so much that it begins to change us in the present.

John the Baptist is tapping into this human inclination, but he’s working with the ultimate in anticipation. “Repent!” he calls out, “For the kingdom of

heaven has come near!” This sentence, packed as it is, seems to be the message of John’s preaching. Those two things go together. The coming near of the kingdom of heaven, and repentance. The coming near of the kingdom invites, maybe demands, repentance. Baptism was the sign that a person had committed to repentance; that is, baptism was the outward sign of an inward change, sparked by the change of the approach of the kingdom of heaven.

Repentance, for John, wasn’t a one paragraph prayer that a person said one time and got it over and done with. Repentance was a change in their way of life and commitments, a change that would have to be repeated over and over.

He clearly was working outside the usual system. In the way of the prophets, he challenged the authority structures, particularly the religious authorities. First of all, he’s out in the wilderness, not in Jerusalem, not in the Temple. He’s wearing camel’s hair clothing, unconcerned with long fringes on prayer shawls. He’s offering people the forgiveness of sins not within the elaborate system of sacrifices the Israelites had followed for centuries, but through internal repentance, external changes of behavior, and baptism. He intends for people, including those who thought they had religion all figured out, to change their entire way of being and entire way of life.

John called religious experts a “brood of vipers” and clearly stated that none of the religious people should count on being on God’s good side, unless they could show fruit of repentance. And why? Because the kingdom of God had come near. Their religion needed to be real, they continually needed to turn aside from their habits and the systems they had built to support those habits.

What John wants to happen, what he is preparing the people for, is that in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God is coming near, coming so near that it already starts to change them. It starts to prepare their hearts, and turn them to bear the fruits of the kingdom. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” he preaches, over and over, until they repent and are baptized.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” again. But this time, not John, but Jesus. That’s how he begins his preaching ministry (4:17). He calls the disciples, and after some time together, he sends them out with the instruction to preach, “The kingdom of heaven has come near!” (10:7).

The fruit of the kingdom is healed people, forgiven people, included people, welcomed people, people who are turned in a new direction, people who continue to turn toward that new direction, people who are changed by the ever-approaching kingdom of God, coming nearer and nearer.

John's message, which was the same as Jesus's message, which was the same as the disciples' message, is no less real for us. The kingdom of heaven has come near, and its nearness has begun to change the world. That's hard to see and hard to believe some days, I know. Repentance means that we continually choose to turn away from the despair that fills our world, to continually turn away from systems that are set up for the benefit of some humans over others, to turn away from the certainty that we alone are right. Repentance is a process of turning toward the fruit of the kingdom of God, turning toward love of God and love of neighbor, turning toward the ways that lead to healing and life. Repent! John tells us, Jesus tells us, the disciples tell us, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.