

When I was a kid I loved the puzzles where you have to see how many umbrellas or chipmunks or words you can find hidden in the picture. I was reminded of this by this morning's gospel which ends with the words, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." It left me wondering where exactly the good news is hiding in this account of John's preaching.

It seems that he was mainly talking about ethics - answering the question "How then shall I live?" in very practical ways. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Tax-collectors should "collect no more than the amount prescribed." Soldiers were not to "extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with [their] wages." This was a different way to live. Rather than using their ability to exploit or oppress, soldiers and tax-collectors were to act honorably and honestly.

I imagine that this would not have been popular with their friends. If all the tax collectors were lining their pockets by charging extra they would not have been happy about one or two who started charging only the amount the Romans required - they would be under-cutting the local rates. And if soldiers stopped going about extorting money they would probably have been berated as stupid by their friends, possible even shunned. Not to mention the loss of income.

Even though we may try to act honorably and honestly ourselves, we are part of a country and a culture which continues to exploit. We export hazardous waste; our corporations look for people willing to work for really low wages in bad conditions so we can have cheap clothes, and get work done in countries where labor laws don't interfere with how long people will work. It's hard for us as individuals to find ways to stop exploiting people. We can't choose not to be Americans or not to wear clothes or to take the heavy metals out of our electronic devices.

The kind of ethical behavior John the Baptizer is preaching is very difficult.

Except perhaps for that first statement "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Part of the good news is that we get to share our abundance; and that's good news because when we are down on our luck, other people will share with us too. This was one of the hallmarks of the early church –they shared everything they had with each other.

I am grateful for the many ways that we, the people of St. Benedict's, share our abundance with others – from serving meals at 40 Prado and the Los Osos Community Dinners, to the Warming Shelter, Laundry Love and the Abundance Shop itself. But there's probably a lot more we can do. I know that my wardrobe needs a good overhaul to move on the things I never wear.

Yet I don't think John would feel that my annual cleanout would really meet the point he was trying to make. I might express it as living frugally and investing wisely so that we can give generously. There is no doubt that most of us have more and continue to get more stuff than we could possibly need. And the more we gather stuff, the more of the planet's resources we are using which could be available to someone who really has nothing. We are among the biggest contributors to global warming. It takes resources and energy to make stuff, and then resources and energy to recycle or trash stuff. All of which is like having several coats and keeping them to ourselves.

The people waiting on the border for asylum are fleeing poverty, violence and crime in their own countries. Violence and crime are often the result of conflicts over the control of scarce resources. Helping others with food or services while at the same time over-consuming the

world's resources is like fishing babies out of the river, and not realizing that you are also responsible for throwing them in.

But I digress, back to searching for the good news.

There are many people who think the good news is that if we do good things God will reward us either now or in the future. This is not what John is saying. There are also people who think the good news is that if we keep to certain rules and behave in specific ways, or *don't* behave in specific ways then God will bless us. This is also not what John is saying. The good news is not about a particular ethical code or system.

Neither is it that once we are baptized, or once we have “been saved” we can carry on the way we were without changing our lives. John says, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'” In other words, true repentance always leads to a change in behavior.

So what *is* the good news that John is preaching?

I think we find it hidden a couple of verses earlier, in the part of the story we heard last week, “[John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

We are going to have to tease that out a little more to see the good news that's hidden here.

It's partly in the word translated as “repentance”. In Greek it's *metanoia* which comes from two words – meta meaning “beyond” and nous meaning “mind.” Although *metanoia* is often understood as being like penitence – being filled with sorrow or grief for one's misdeeds, the closer translation is a change in mind, and through the centuries many theologians have argued that *metanoia* really means a deep and fundamental change of mind and heart.

So perhaps John was preaching a baptism of a deep and abiding change of heart and mind. Such a change doesn't come out of nowhere. Martin Luther clearly saw *metanoia* as a sign of God's grace. John was baptizing people who had experienced a change in their consciousness. I expect that most of us have had such changes in our own consciousness. Something which you have heard and even accepted as an idea suddenly makes sense to you in a new way; or suddenly, inexplicably you experience the presence of God; or oneness with the whole of Creation.

This change of heart is part of the Good News. We no longer need to be stuck in the old ways of looking at things – God breaks through into our hearts and minds again and again, bringing new insight and new understanding. This isn't something that we can make happen but it is something that we can be open to, something that we can seek.

I love the few verses we heard today from Philippians 4 “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Now I don't know about you, but I know that for me that can only be true as a result of *metanoia*. I am not a naturally cheerful person but increasingly through God's grace bringing about *metanoia* in my mind and heart, I can live these verses. Increasingly, I can rejoice, be gentle, trust and be peaceful.

But I would never get there on my own.

It takes a change of consciousness to acknowledge the despair and depression of a world in crisis and still rejoice, knowing that the Lord is

near. It takes *metanoia* to listen to the news and still know the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds.

This is very similar to the conversation we had two weeks ago about raising your head and looking up. It's not something that we can force. It's not about gritting our teeth and carrying on. It's about choosing to invite the Holy Spirit to make a radical change in your heart and mind. It's about raising your head and seeing that God is truly here, God is in the middle of the chaos and trusting that She will bring forgiveness.

Forgiveness – that's the other part of the Good News we're searching for.

“[John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” He was proclaiming that if you experience *metanoia* through the grace of God and symbolically demonstrate it in baptism then forgiveness follows.

But maybe we have that the wrong way round.

Perhaps forgiveness is what brings about *metanoia* and *metanoia* brings about forgiveness. It's like the line in the Prayer that Jesus Taught Us “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Forgiveness is not a spectator sport.

Forgiveness and a change in heart and mind are inextricably tied together. Because we don't forgive very much naturally. We naturally hold grudges. We naturally divide the world into us and them and find reasons not to like *them*. And of course they are busy finding reasons not to like us. And when that basic human tendency gets amplified by political and even religious leaders it becomes harder and harder to welcome the *metanoia* that leads to forgiveness.

But my friends, it is the nature of God to be forgiving. Forgiveness and God go hand in hand – you can't separate them. That is what Jesus showed us on the cross when he prayed "Forgive them Lord for they know not what they do." Even as he was being nailed to the cross and hung up like a scarecrow to die, his thoughts were of forgiveness.

So the *metanoia* which brings us to God is not so much God forgiving our sins – God already did that, even before we got round to sinning - rather it is the change of heart which enables us to forgive, which raises our consciousness so that we can see with God's eyes. So we can see with God's eyes of love and forgiveness that good will always triumph, that through the pain and the agony and the anger, God is here.

As John preached the good news, the people were filled with expectancy, wondering if perhaps John were the Messiah.

Perhaps it is going to take an experience of *metanoia* for God to move away the hard rocks of cynicism and skepticism that have grown in our hearts since we were little children, so that we can wait with expectancy asking, is this the day that the Messiah will come? And everyday our adult selves, our hearts and minds that are being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit may answer "yes". Yes, today is the day that the Lord has made." Today is the day that we may raise our heads and see the coming of the Christ through the eyes of trust and faith.

I close with a quote from Dag Hammarskjold which for me brings together the good news of *metanoia* and forgiveness, "For all that has been thanks, for all that will be –yes!"