



## Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

### *The New Kingdom Takes Shape*

Sermon by Pastor John Strommen

on Matthew 3:1-17

Sunday, January 13, 2019

Ah, January. The time of year many Americans resolve to do battle with their humanity. You know, during the holidays, every time we walk by a box of chocolates or peanut m and m's, we realize that the flesh is weak. Or there may be bad habits to eliminate, aspirations we have: therefore, one might say, "And so, on January 1, I will work out every day, eat only vegetables, nuts and legumes, become employee of the month, volunteer for 5 charities, begin my first novel, become a concert pianist, and so on and so on."

Now, goal setting can be an effective tool, no doubt, but they've done studies on the success rates of New Year's resolutions. Here's what happens to New Year's resolutions: year after year at the health clubs I've belonged to, I notice a large influx of people in January, especially early January. New Year's resolutions, I imagine. So, I may have to wait in line for the machine I want or for a shower afterward. But my grumbling is always alleviated by the very sure and certain knowledge that this is temporary. Come February, the influx will recede faster than my hairline did 20 years ago. And indeed, this is what they've found in studies about New Year's resolutions: they don't work.

But why? Is it because the flesh is weak or are we too idealistic? In the end, for all the lovely attributes any of us have, we also are finite creatures, we have warts – figuratively and literally – and, as the apostle Paul pointed out painfully in the book of Romans, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Simply put, it's not easy being human. Often, we feel powerless. And between our bondage to sin and our own mortality, we *are* relatively powerless. So, our problem is way bigger than failing to show up at the gym in February. Resolutions based on "I'd love to be this" or "I wish I were that" are not powerful enough levers for meaningful change.

Be that as it may, people have been trying to turn their lives around for centuries, and when someone inspired them to think positively and believe they could change, they'd show up in droves. Such was the case with John the Baptist, a fiery preacher and prophet, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." John lived on the edge of the wilderness and lived like it too. Locusts and wild honey for breakfast, anyone? John's message was as simple as his diet: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near!" The word "repent" means "turn your life around," and that was why people flocked to hear him: to be "christened" in baptism as a new person.

But John was not merely pitching his own version of hopeless New Year's resolutions. This wasn't about mere self-improvement or wishful thinking. "Repent," said John, "for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" Other Gospel writers refer to this as the "Kingdom of God." Whoaaa! That's like God showing up at your house, so you better get cleaning! "You better be good for goodness sake!"

You may recall in the previous chapter in Matthew that King Herod was threatened by the new king in town – Jesus. Tragically so. So, now John is saying that the kingdom of this new king is right here. Repent, therefore, and bear fruit worthy of repentance, for the tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down. "And while I baptize with water," John said, "the one who is coming after me will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire." In fact, wheat and chaff - the worthy and unworthy - will be separated, and the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire.

OK, so John the Baptist is playing his part in preparing the way for the new king, Jesus. So he's trying to describe for us what this new kingdom is like. But let me ask, does this sound like Jesus to you? Laying an ax to the tree, chaff being burned with unquenchable fire? Jesus is usually about mercy, not violent judgment. John the Baptist knew God's kingdom was coming, but he didn't fully understand what the nature of that kingdom was, so he went all hellfire and brimstone. As theologians have pointed out, Jesus was not the savior anyone was looking for – including John - but he was the one we needed!

So, suddenly, John is face to face with Jesus, who has come to be baptized. John knew right away this was the king of the kingdom he'd been preaching about, so John said, "I need to be baptized by you and yet *you come to me?*"

John had the same question we do: *why was Jesus getting baptized?* Baptism is for sinners who wish to repent, not Jesus!

Let's see if Jesus' answer clears things up. He says to John the baptism is necessary to fulfill all righteousness. Does that clear it up for you? Me neither.

To *fulfill all righteousness*. What does that mean? If I ask you what words you think of when I say the word "righteousness," what would you say?

Normally, we associate the word *righteousness* with a lofty moral and spiritual purity - qualities closely related to perfection. OK, so God is already righteous. How does Jesus' *baptism* fulfill God's *righteousness*?

The word "righteousness" means something different than what we think it does. It doesn't mean static qualities of perfection. It's a relational term: it means something very close to the word "Emmanuel" that Matthew used in the first chapter, "God is with us." Righteousness means not perfection, but love - the will of God to empty God's own self of power, become a servant, become one of us. Why? To bear with us and for us the weight of our broken and mortal lives. To share with us and for us the life and love that come from God.

So, Jesus' baptism establishes God's solidarity with us in the human enterprise. Because of the righteousness of God who meets us where we are, we do not run from our humanity, our vulnerability, our brokenness, because that is where God has chosen to meet us. That is where we find God. God is right there when you think you are a godless son of gun, helping you get through. The righteousness of God is that God is in that godforsaken place this life sometimes gives you, bringing you through it and into life.

This idea about God is not assumed by everyone. Do you know the song "American Pie" by Don McLean? Bye, bye miss American pie, drove my Chevy to the levy and the levy was dry...The song is about the day the music died, and refers to the day when Buddy Holly died tragically in a plane crash in Iowa. The day the music died also symbolizes life for all of us at times: when things go south in our heart and soul or in our world or both. The day the music died. One of my favorite lines in the song is when he sings, "and the three men I admire most, the father, son and Holy Ghost. They caught the last train for the coast, the day the music died."

So, the three persons of God's Holy trinity see how bad things are and they say, "we're getting' out of here." And you're left with this image of hard times in the heartland while God is going the opposite direction, reading a magazine on a

train thinking about the beach. Why would God mess with the heartache of a messed up creation?

There are echoes of American Pie in our Christian world. For instance, many well-meaning Christians assume that if they are in a painful place in life, it must partly be because they've been a bad Christian, or their faith is not very good. The music died, and God took the train to be with the righteous people who have their life together. Not you. The task ahead, then, is to get your life in order so that God will like you again, be present for you again.

Matthew says otherwise: God's righteousness is that God meets you in those darker places and never abandons you. Those broken places in our lives are holy ground. In this world, the day the music died happens *over and over again*, and God does not catch a train for the coast. Instead, we learn in Matthew, God the father emptied himself of power, taking the form of servant through his Son, Jesus of Nazareth. While he was baptized in the Jordan, the father said he was well pleased as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus with the power of God unleashed in him. The power of God as a servant.

And that's what the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost did on the day the music died.

What does this have to do with your own baptism that you affirm today? Your baptism is an affirmation that you need not fret over your humanity, its ragged edges and deep fractures. That is where God meets you. It is holy ground, so don't live in fear!

So, is there any hope for our new years' resolutions? Well, the God who meets you in the humblest and most desperate dimensions of your humanity, is also at work remaking you. In your baptism, you are a new creation in Christ, that reorders your humanity to reflect the image of God. So, yes, God has seen to it that you can and will change. We are being recreated to be a servant, just like Jesus. Amen.