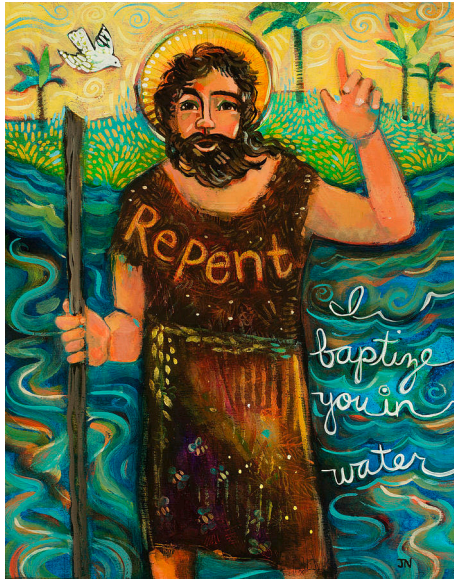


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# The Second Sunday of Advent

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“Are You the Same Person You Used to Be?” This is the title and driving question of Joshua Rothman’s article in an October *New Yorker*.

Rothman reflects on this question of change not in the abstract but in the company of his four-year-old son. Building Legos together, twirling him from his shoulders to the ground, walking along the coast, Rothman wonders: how much of himself, and these moments with his dad, will he remember? He worries that he won’t remember enough: my son, who is happy and voluble, is so much fun to be around that I sometimes mourn, on his behalf, his future inability to remember himself?

This difficulty in remembering our childhoods raises the question: are we the same person at 26 that we were at 6? How about 46? 86?

Rothman posits there are two types of people. Dividers and Continuers. Some people feel that they’ve altered profoundly through the years, and to them the past seems like a foreign country, characterized by peculiar customs, values, and tastes. (Those boyfriends! That music! Those outfits!) But others have a strong sense of connection with their younger selves, and for them the past remains a home.

Often enough, it relates to our childhoods. Continuers may have had a largely positive childhood, with the Good Enough Parents, who laid a foundation of values, manners, and dispositions that one continues to experience today. Continuers, ever steady-footed, don’t necessarily want to change, at least not radically, preferring instead to build on the person they’ve always been. Continuers experience their lives like a story, one with a narrative arc, consistent characters, themes, tensions.

Dividers, on the other hand have struck out for the New and the Different. They’ve sought to become different people than what their parents, and teachers, and coaches expected of them. Becoming a different person, a new person may be a way to leave behind the repressive forces allied against them. A Divider looks back on their life – that first

marriage; that year off from college following the Grateful Dead; that irredeemably tragic hair style – and feels like a totally different, totally new person now than back then.

Rothman discusses one example of a Divider who all but wants to have separate names for each of the selves he's been. The fetus might have its own name, the infant another, the pre-teen and then teen self its own identity, the unmarried self going by something totally different than the married father. Why keep the same name if we are totally different people?

These questions Rothman raises are related to his son, Peter, and his sense of the passing of time. You can feel the loving father's tone throughout the piece as he's witnessing all sorts of change – Peter is outgrowing his bed; no longer fitting in his old favorite shirt; now walking around the house, unsupervised, and with scissors – and the loving father can't help but want his son not to change too much; I hope he never wants to change his name. But I hope he changes and grows as a person; that he has a sense of adventure and possibility, and he discovers different parts of himself. He voices his dueling aspirations for his son: “keep growing; keep being you.” As I wrote the sermon, I couldn't help but look at the wing person beside me playing with my phone, and hope that this 11-month bundle of joy never loses her effervescently dimpled smile, her flare for the mischievous, and her tireless ability to get back up every time she falls. Keep changing; keep being you.

And so as we stumble out into the wilderness to John, I'd like us to have Rothman's reflections in mind. Because John the Baptist: he is a capital D Divider. He's a radical, offbeat prophet of the End of the World. But he wasn't always this way. We don't know much about his upbringing but we do know that his mother Elizabeth, a relative of Mary's, was rather devout, and his father Zechariah was a priest in house of Abijah, and both were of the line of Aaron. Translation: John's parents went to church every Sunday. Now we don't know what happened, if he had a bad experience in Sunday

School or what, but John takes a hard turn away from the establishment religion of his day, becoming instead a desert wandering, locust- and honey-eating prophet, a 1st century Mad-Eye Moody with his good eye cocked to the horizon for the coming of the Messiah. John isn't just a Divider; his message is sharply divisive.

Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven has come near. John's message is stark and undiluted. The Pharisees and Sadducees approach – they were probably Continuers – and John says, “God loves you just as you are, keep being yourself.” NO! You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Translation: you must change. And then he peppers them with a set of divisive images. “You think you are hot stuff: God can make a rock more alive than you. There is an ax poised and ready to be swung at the root of your tree. And there is a fire to change that dead wood to rubble.”

As far as John is concerned, this isn't just his ministry either. He is a forerunner, the prelude, the opening act of another – The Great Divider Himself – who comes with a purifying fire, and a winnowing fork in his hand. He is going to tear away all that is distorted and twisted and not of God from what is.

The theme of the Forerunner's message, of his ministry, is that word “repent.” Now repent is sort of a troubling word; troubling because it is so charged with judgment and all too often evokes a street corner preacher exclaiming bigotries into a megaphone while unassuming people are just trying to get to the game. As you may know the Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, literally meaning “change your mind” or “turn around.” Change your thinking. And those translations are adequate.

But I think there is a richer understanding if you trace the word back to the Hebrew Scripture. The Hebrew word for repent is *shuv*, and *shuv* in the Old Testament is about changing one's mind, and turning back, yes, but it's also a concept the Prophet Jeremiah uses when speaking to the

Israelites in exile. Many of those in exile had assimilated to Babylonian ways of life, its exotic ways, and strange deities, and Jeremiah is out to persuade them to return back to Israel. It's this usage to those in exile that is the most suggestive. Jeremiah says, "Repent now everyone from his evil way, and dwell in the land." Jeremiah's meaning to the Israelites in Babylonian exile is something more like "return home." It's safe. "Come home." Come back to the Holy Land. Come home to God. Come home to God's embrace. Returning to the Land, Returning to Yahweh, returning home – shuv. Repentance isn't a word to bully people into a change of heart. It's an invitation home.

For John the Baptist, maybe what we need to repent of is that we've left home. We've moved out of our relationship with God. We've cozied up to other things. We've sought belonging in destructive places. We've become spiritual vagrants, and looked for shelter in status, money, power, and prestige. We mistook our own bank account, or busyness, or physical beauty, or sheer smarts, or will-power for our true home, but these can't shelter the deepest parts of ourselves. To those who've wandered out into the wilderness, who stand on the banks of the Jordan, John wants to divide us from the broken and temporary shelters the world has thrown together; he invites us home into God. Home into God's sacred embrace.

If we are honest, we aren't quite sure we want to make our home with the God John the Baptist is preaching. The God of wrath, the God of the winnowing fork, the God of fire. This God doesn't sound too homey. Perhaps what we fear most about this God is that she will ask us to change. It is a terrifying thing, wrote the author of the book of Hebrews, to fall into the hands of the Living God. Indeed: the God of cool flowing water is also the God of scorching flame; the God whose staff guides his sheep is the God whose winnowing fork tears the chaff from the wheat.

The prophet doesn't say, "Come home; you'll be instantly comfortable. Come home to a loving, but purifying embrace."

I suspect on that morning, on the shores of the Jordan,

were both Continuers and Dividers. And while I've said John was a Divider, I think his invitation into the river is extended to both. These two types of people both need the baptism, both need to come home. Both need the baptism of repentance.

For the Continuer, we might imagine there to be a temptation to resist change. The Continuer has a good and healthy sense of self, has a responsible job and children to whom they are passing along the same foundations of character. The Continuer knows who they are, what they value, and frankly, it's not hard to imagine that the Continuer holds the Divider in a bit of contempt or pity. They just need to settle down, and stop trying to invent themselves anew every 8 seconds.

The Divider, that Lover of the New, likely has a buoyant sense of adventure and thrill; they love to experience life, and to make new memories. They seek the untrod and the different and the one-of-a-kind. The only constant in the Dividers life is Change. The Divider just as well may look at the Continuer and find someone whose life is boring, uneventful, stuck in the cul-de-sac of predictability.

It is important to remember that this Baptism of Repentance, this stepping into the chilly waters of the Jordan, isn't the same water for the people who step into it. The message is the same, Come Home to God. But the meaning is different and is probably best summed up by Anne Lamott when she said, "God loves you just the way you are, and God loves you too much to leave you that way."

To the Divider, God says, "I love you; you don't need to change a thing. You don't have to invent yourself to prove that you matter; because I created you, you will always matter. You don't have to change your name, your identity; I've given you an identity, and I've named you Beloved. You don't have to pretend like life is something you've got to chase at every turn; I am your life."

To the Continuer, God says, "But my love does want to change you; not just tinker with some of your behaviors, but

erupt within your life, and change you at the depths of your being. You were made for more. For more searching, more exploring, more openness to Being. The story you tell about yourself isn't big enough. My love is writing a larger story through you. And don't forget: I don't love you because you are good; I love you because I'm good."

To both the Continuer and the Divider John's question comes down as a hammer: are you willing to change? No, we can state it better. Are you willing to be changed? Will you forsake who you think you are; will you step into the waters of Repentance; will you Come Home – come home to that continuous and purifying energy that sustains you, and will divide you from all that separates you from Sacred Embrace?