

December 15, 2016

Dr. Martha Robbins, Joan Marshall Professor Emerita of Pastoral Care / Director of *Pneuma* Institute

Scripture

Matthew 3:1-12

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Devotional

Christmas is only 10 days away. “Are you ready for it?” friends and relatives may ask? Some may have all the externals ready or “under control” for the holiday celebrations. Others may feel chronically unprepared and overwhelmed by the hectic pace of our lives triggered by the enormity of the issues we face, such as new presidential leadership, the speed of technological innovations, unprecedented moral questions, ecological disasters, and unrelenting acts of violence and threats of terror. Still others have a sense of dis-ease and are searching for a sense of purpose and meaning for their lives, much less the meaning of Christmas that appears as tinsel to them.

So how can we really hear the words of John the Baptist proclaiming that the reign of God *has* come near? Are we ready for it—for the coming of the One who “baptizes (us) with the Holy Spirit and fire” and thus effects the reign of God in our midst? How do we prepare to receive this ever coming One within our hearts and in our midst? John is clear in his guidance: “Repent!” This word may evoke a sense of shame that automatically turns in on itself with some inner judgment, such as, “I’m not good enough.” The true sense of repentance, however, is born in relationship, in the faith-filled experience of being loved into being at every moment by God who “words” us forth in and through Christ, who became flesh to dwell with us, bear our sins unto death, and send us His very Spirit of Love. The Spirit, source of life, holiness, and wisdom, enlightens and kindles our hearts with love of God, human beings, and all creation—the world God so loved. Thus, whenever we are truly convicted by the Spirit that we have not loved God, others, and ourselves *as* we have been so loved, we are gifted to feel and express sincere regret or remorse about our offending action or omission. Genuine repentance leads to

confession and acceptance of forgiveness, fills us with gratitude and peace, and brings us back to our true selves-in-Christ in relation to God, others, and creation.

Prayer

Most gracious and loving God, send forth your Holy Spirit to search, purify, consume, and make holy all that is in me (especially _____) that prevents me from perceiving and welcoming the Risen Christ among us, inviting us to co-labor with him in his mission of building the reign of God in our midst.