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Sermon Given for Second Congregational Church of Beverly  
Matthew 3:1-17  
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*Straight on till morn*

This is the fourth sermon in our Lenten series on *Unbinding Your Heart*. Those of you who have been participating in our Lenten study may recognize the scripture readings from today, dealing with John the Baptist's ministry and his encounter with Jesus. Now, we usually think about John the Baptist mainly in symbolic terms, heralding the imminent arrival of Christ, as indeed happens in this passage. But we should always remember that John the Baptist had an incredibly successful ministry himself. It eventually died out, but it still lasted a century after he died. As we continue to think about what role God plays in our lives and how we are going to put our church's vision into action, I think John the Baptist's ministry can give us some clues into how successful ministries work.

But before we do, it being Sunday morning at Second Church, I thought I'd start with a sports story. The Winter Olympics ended last week, and I want to know if any of you were as enthralled by the curling competition as I was. For those of you who don't know, curling is basically ice bowling; a game that involves sliding 50-pound weights across the ice and trying to hit a target. Most people I know found

themselves unable to turn away, just on a compulsive level. So too was I watching, but I wasn't rooting for the American team. I was actually rooting for the Canadian team. Not because Canada is the only country in the world that cares about curling, and the home ice, but because the captain of the Canadian team did something extraordinary four years ago. After twenty years as a world-class curler, Kevin Martin, at 40, had a new vision for transforming curling, and winning the 2010 Olympic gold medal. Now, for guys like me, one of the attractive things about curling is that most curlers look like me, well, a little bigger maybe. But a little overweight, a little gangly, a little nerdy. But Kevin Martin had the idea that curlers ought to be athletes, so he wanted to spend four years **training** like Olympic athletes, rather than drinking a few beers at the club after practice. The people he had curled with for 20 years wanted no part of his vision and fell away. But then a funny thing happened. The captain of the best young curling team in Canada; someone who might have qualified for the Olympics with his own team, looked at Kevin Martin and said, "I like where you are going, and I want to go there, too." So that captain demoted himself to be a part of Martin's vision. Bit by bit, day by day, year by year, that team transformed themselves from, effectively, ice bowlers, into an unstoppable athletic force. They came into the Olympics and swept the 9 preliminary matches. When matches ended early, they went to the gym to work out. And then their vision paid off last Saturday night when, in front of a

crowd that broke into the Canadian national anthem DURING THE MATCH, they won the gold medal.

I bring up Kevin Martin because he, like John the Baptist, had a clear vision for transformative change. Like John the Baptist, he alienated some people who were not lined up with his vision. But, like John the Baptist, he found talented and inspired followers and like John the Baptist, he accomplished his goals. Not only did he win the Gold medal, but the Canadian curlers are instantly recognizable by their fitness, and one of his teammates even wrote a book on how to be their sort of transformed curler. Every curler wants to be a part of his vision and his success. So as we turn to John the Baptist and think about how our lives have been transformed by our faith, keep Kevin Martin in mind.

Now, John the Baptist doesn't seem to have much going for him. John doesn't have a church building, and doesn't have a convenient location off a major highway. No, he's competing with Herod's Temple in Jerusalem from the wilderness outside of town. While there, is he living on the lavish sacrifices of his followers? No. He eats locusts and honey. Now, this sounds poetic, but I want us all to pause and think through the implications of living on locusts and honey in the wilderness. First, in the wilderness, he didn't have a lot of farmers markets, and Shaw's sure hadn't gotten there yet. So if he's eating honey, he's getting it from the

bees. Locusts, as you know, are large insects. So set this image in your mind of a man covered in beestings and hunting bugs. How is he dressed while doing this? Is he wearing vestments? No, in camel hair, while wearing a leather belt. So here's a man covered in sores, wearing uncomfortable clothing and living on bugs while preaching out in a field beyond Jerusalem. This is the guy that God has called upon to be the sneak preview. But what a sneak preview it was. John the Baptist had one message. That message was not, "God loves you," it was not "You are doing all right," it was, "The Man is coming around, and you had best be walking a straight line when he does." He had a vision.

And what's amazing is that the people came to him. We are told that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him. If people wanted fancy clothes, a luxurious building, the smell of cooking meat, and tradition, they could have gotten it all in the Temple in the center of town. That Temple was full of music and incense and sacrifice, even priests in priestly garb. But people didn't find that to be enough. As they were in Jerusalem, they started to hear about this guy out in the wilderness, and to see how he had affected those who went out to be baptized by him. And so more people went out there to join in John's vision and be transformed. Pretty soon, even the Sadducees and Pharisees came. And who were the Sadducees and the Pharisees? Priests from the Temple! His vision was so clear, the presence of the Holy Spirit so obvious, that the Priests came to HIM for a

transformed life. But these priests are like Kevin Martin's old teammates, who wanted the Gold medal, but didn't want to put in the time and energy to transform themselves. So, in one of his less welcoming moments, John says to them, "you brood of vipers, repent first, then come to me." He is not swayed by their power and influence, but stays true to his vision.

John's message to them is, "come here ready to have the Holy Spirit worked upon you, and we'll leave you a transformed person." This message was so strong that Jesus himself came to John. John, understanding who was before him, told Jesus, "oh no. This is all wrong. I should join YOUR church." But Jesus stops him. Jesus sees the transformative power of John's baptisms, and wants to be transformed. JESUS HIMSELF sees the work John has done with other people and seeks the same transformation. And that's exactly what he gets. When John Baptizes Jesus, THAT is moment that the Holy Spirit descends upon him. Jesus, like so many other people, finds his life transformed by John, and John's mission is fulfilled.

Now, in case you feel like you stumbled into the wrong church building this morning, I want to say two things. The first is that, while I love honey, I buy mine at Costco. If you see me near a beehive, it will be with a smoke gun and in full protective gear. John the Baptist had an extremely specific and timely message two thousand years ago. His message is not our message. He was called upon by the

Holy Spirit to prepare the way of Jesus and Jesus's ministry on earth. We are called upon to fulfill it here and now, in North Beverly, in Salem, at the Casa and around the world with no end in sight. Our communication with the Holy Spirit came not at one moment, but in the extensive talks and discussions surrounding our Vision. This is our message, and we need to bring out in the world. We worship a powerful God in this church, and that God changes lives. Our vision overflows with ways in which we want to transform our lives, from mission goals to radical welcome, to our own increased devotional opportunities. Why, after all, do people come to church? To be a part of a community, to be a part of a broader family, to educate their children and, ultimately, just like the followers of John the Baptist, to let God's presence, the love of Jesus and the sustaining support of the Holy Spirit work themselves in us, making us better people. We come to be transformed, little by little, every week.

But we look at words like transformative, and see images like the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus, and read works by people like Martha Grace Reese, and see in our heads people testifying at the front of the church. This is not our way, so we become uncomfortable. But here's the thing. When you've got great stuff, people want to hear about it, and want to hear about it from people like themselves. Kevin Martin's team published a book, because people needed to hear his message. John the Baptist attracted the priests from the Temple, and then God

himself, but only because people saw how the Holy Spirit had worked itself in his followers. For us, that means sometimes opening up and telling people what we do here at church, and showing them that people like them have been transformed, too. Feeding the five thousand, doing Bible Study, serving on committees, doing that day by day work of finding the Holy Spirit around us and letting it work its magic. We need to show them that transformation can be like Kevin Martin's. Bit by bit, day by day, year by year, in the things that we do here. Because if no one knows what we do here, the image they'll have of transformation will be that evangelical altar call that makes us so uncomfortable. Talking about our transformation will let the Spirit work in us just that much more, as we understand better how God has transformed our lives. We have the power to show a different way, that way that says, follow me to be transformed. It's second church on the right, and straight on till morn.

Let us pray.