

“Change Your Mind”
Luke 3:1-6

What is the year that fits this description? It is the first year of president Obama’s administration, when David Patterson was governor of New York, and Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand are senators from New York. (2009) What about this year? It was the year when George W. Bush was president of the United States, Dick Cheney was the vice president, and Colin Powell was the Secretary of State, when a major attack took place. (2001) By framing things in their historical context, we not only remember the year of the events but also the emotional, economic, and spiritual significance of those times. Who wouldn’t remember the political and emotional climate after 9/11 in 2001?

This is what the author of Luke was doing in our Gospel lesson for today. The events of the ministry of Jesus Christ as presented by Luke took place in a specific time in history around the year 28 CE. Also, by referring the people back to a specific time in history, the author was creating the emotional and political background of the story. As people heard the names of these political leaders, they would have immediately remembered their corruption. The Emperor Tiberius was a great military general for Rome, but he was a ruthless emperor, reclusive, sexually preying on young people and killing people ruthlessly. He represented the worst image of the tyranny of the Roman Empire for the Jewish people. Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea during the time of the ministry of Jesus. His career was marked by frequent executions with either a sham of a trial or no trial. His rule was known for bribes, robberies, and intentionally offending the Jews. Herod Antipas, king of Galilee (4 BCE – 39 CE) squandered money, seduced his brother Philip’s wife and married her, was submissive in his loyalty to Rome, and repeatedly offended Jewish religious practices. Philip, tetrarch of Trachonitis (4 BCE - 34 CE) was thoroughly Hellenized and Romanized, completely rejecting his Jewish faith and practice.

Even the priests of the temple that Luke lists were just as bad as the rulers. Annas was not the high priest in 27 CE. Annas was the former high priest (6-15 CE), while Caiaphas was the present high priest (18 – 36 CE). But Luke lists both of them as the current high priests because Annas had built his position into one of the most powerful of the Jewish high priests. He built the primary Jewish aristocracy that combined in this single group of the religious leaders of Israel (the priests, Sadducees and Pharisees) the political, economic and religious power of Israel that ruled Judea and even much of Galilee with Rome. In fact, Annas had amassed such personal power in his office as high priest that Rome had perceived him as a threat and consequently replaced him in 18 CE with his son, Caiaphas.

With this important historical, political, and spiritual background Luke begins the adult ministry of Jesus Christ which is ushered in by the ministry of John the Baptist. With this background, we see how sharp the contrast is between the corruption of the rulers of the time and the righteousness of John and Jesus as the messengers of hope and salvation. The hope and salvation which Jesus brings is what is needed for the people in these times of hopelessness and oppression. The kingdom of God is the community of God being called and transformed into relationships of love and care.

It is interesting to see also that the corrupt powers of the day were all living in fortresses and palaces, while John the Baptist was living in the wilderness. The wilderness is a very important place of formation and transformation in the Bible. The wilderness was where Moses met God at a burning bush. The wilderness was the place the people of Israel spent 40 years after

escaping slavery and before they went in the Promised Land. The wilderness was the place where they received the Law of God which taught them about creating communities of justice and peace.

John the Baptist out of his wilderness experience was strong enough to confront the powers of his day and to help the people of faith to repent of their acceptance of life lived under political oppression, economic exploitation and religious domination. And the symbol for repentance which John called the people of Israel to was baptism. Baptism to us is a wonderful experience of faith and joy. But to the Jews of John's day, this was an offensive call. This was a practice that started around the 6th century BCE for the Gentiles who became Jewish. A Jew did not need to be baptized. But John used this ritual as a symbol of purification of the veils of the dominant culture. It was an invitation to all to become true to their faith in God. This was their way of preparing the way of the Lord, of opening their hearts, minds and even culture to the coming of Christ.

Luke wanted the people to hear that a different future was possible but they needed to get ready to receive it. This is the invitation of the Gospel lesson for us today. In the season of Advent as we prepare to receive the birth of Christ, we are invited to prepare the way of the Lord, to repent from our ways of being complacent about the injustices of our world. But in order to repent, first we must understand that repentance is not about guilt or shame. In his book, *The Naked Now*, Richard Rohr sheds some light on this for us, "But did anyone every tell you that Jesus' very first message in the Gospels, which is usually translated as "convert," "repent," or reform" is the Greek word *metanoia*, which quite literally means to "change your mind"? Jesus' first word to us was "change! - and *mind* change at that! What we have translated as "repent" is not a moralistic or even church word at all; it is a clear strategy for enlightenment for the world..." The invitation to repent to prepare the way for God's presence in our lives is an invitation to open our minds and our hearts to new and fresh visions. If we go year after year thinking the same way and believing the same way about everything around us, chances are we not being open to the work of the Spirit. If we insist on getting things just the way we like them all the time, then chances are we are not open to the coming of the Lord. If we insist on feeling safe all the time without taking any risks to help others or even to help ourselves, then chances are we are closed to new life in Christ.

Cardinal Newman once said that "to be human is to change, to be perfect is to have changed many times." Richard Rohr in the book mentioned earlier said, "If certitude, predictability, and perfect order were so important, Jesus would have come in a time of digital recorders and cameras, and he would have at least written his ideas down somewhere –and more clearly...Ironically, we flourish more by *learning* from our mistakes and changing than by a straight course that teaches us nothing."

In a world where there is much injustice, pain and suffering, we are called to prepare the way of the Lord. The most important part of our preparation is being open and even longing to be changed so that we can be instruments of God's peace and justice in the world. God can do such amazing things in the world that we can never imagine. So our openness to change is the doorway to the kingdom of God. Think of how radical the message of John the Baptist was to the people who heard him. Yet, it opened the door for the coming Jesus. We must be able to listen deeply with openness to change.

The key to repentance or to changing one's mind (and as a result our actions) is being able to hear God's voice in the world and be fully present and open to it. In *The Sacred Art of Listening*, Kay Lindahl writes that "There's something beyond technique when two or more people are

deeply listening to each other. It is an awareness that not only are we present to each other, we are present to something that is spiritual, holy, sacred." But this kind of "deep listening" goes against the cultural grain. Lindahl cites research studies by the International Listening Association which report that we spend about 45 percent of our time listening, but we are distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful about 75 percent of that time. The average attention span for adults is about 22 seconds. Immediately after listening to someone talk, we usually recall only about half of what we've heard; within a few hours, only about 20 percent. Deeply listening to God, to others and to ourselves is a key element in our ability to change, to repent.

This kind of listening is not always easy, especially when the subject is difficult to deal with. This was certainly the case for subject that John the Baptist was dealing with. It was not a sweet little piece that he was presenting them. According to an article by Sandra Rooney in *Spirit Sightings*, this kind of difficult listening is happening in the school system in the state of Mississippi where the study of civil rights is being introduced into its U.S. history curriculum. It will be taught in ten pilot programs this year and extended to the entire system next fall. Even though it was one of the galvanizing events of the civil rights movement that started in the 1950s, most Mississippi children have never heard of Emmett Till, the young black boy lynched by a white mob in Mississippi in 1955. They don't know the stories of the church bombings, sit-ins, voter-registration drives, and demonstrations that took place in their state. Nor do they know the stories about heroes and ordinary folks, including students, who changed the face of the United States during those years. People in their communities just don't like to talk about it. What some students learn may open up uncomfortable conversations in their own families, as one seventeen-year-old student, Sarah Rowley, put it, "Being in your little bubble isn't going to help you at all." Some days the discussion is heated. Some days there are tears. Much of the class centers on gathering oral narratives from local people who grew up in the area when it was a very different place – a place where violence and inequality was just a fact of life. While some think the only thing the course will accomplish is opening old wounds, proponents think it will lead to healing and understanding. They hope this will make Mississippi a better place in the future, even if it means "dredging muddy waters" right now.

May you listen to the voice of God and be open to its transforming power through your inner voice, the voices of your friends, and especially the voices of those you disagree with. May the Lord's Table be for us today a place to receive the presence of God in our hearts so that we are changed into the likeness of Christ. Amen.