

The Very Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
Advent 2, Year A
December 4, 2022
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
Isaiah 11:1-12
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Beyond Your Mind

We knew he was coming. You can start Advent without him, but you can't get too far along in this season before he comes crashing in.

Every year, every Advent, the second and third of the four Advent Sundays give us gospel texts featuring John the Baptizer, Jesus' cousin and forerunner.

And here he is, one more time.

And one more time, the first word out of his mouth in the English translation we use is, "Repent!"

It's a terrible translation.

Matthew's gospel was written in Greek. The first word out of John the Baptizer's mouth in Greek is, "*Metanoia!*"

So, a better translation of the first Greek word out of his mouth would be three English words, "Change your mind!"

He's not talking about feeling bad or experiencing remorse; he's talking about living differently.

Most English translations do a better job with translating this Greek word *metanoia* in the twelfth chapter of Romans, verse two where St Paul, our patron, uses it writing to the Jesus followers in Rome and says to them and to us, "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

We could also translate John the Baptizer's first word this way, "Go beyond your mind!" This would include go beyond your current mindset. Go beyond your current way of looking at things. Go beyond your current worldview. Go beyond yourself to connect to a different source.

What John is calling for is more along the lines of what organizational psychologist Adam Grant promotes when he calls on us to “think again.” His book entitled *Think Again* and his podcast “Rethinking” are great places to learn more about transformed thinking and understanding and how we think does influence how we live.

We can understand why John had to leave Jerusalem and the religious establishment and go out into the desert and down by the riverside to say what he had to say. He is calling for the entire cultural and religious system of his time to be reborn, to be transformed; not always a popular message.

And, lo and behold, tons of people turn up to hear him and to experience the mikveh bath they were used to in nicely constructed pools relocated by John to the wild and flowing water of the Jordan River.

And he tells them, *I am giving you this ritual bath to mark that you are willing to change your minds, to go beyond what you currently know and understand. But there's someone greater coming next who is going to dunk you in the Spirit and fire.*

Metanoia. It's about transformation. And transformation *is* what we're talking about when we talk about conversion, repentance. Conversion is one thing becoming another, something becoming something else.

Both personal transformation and cultural and congregational transformation take time, effort, patience, good humor mixed with experimentation and course correction.

Metanoia isn't magic; it's a process. Transformation doesn't happen all at once. Not magic; *metanoia*.

In the words of our sister Episcopalian Dr Brené Brown, “Everybody wants transformation; nobody wants change.”

How do we move along in this transformation that does require change? What are the signs of progress, if there is such a thing?

For one, according to John, we stop relying on our pedigree, whatever it is. It's what he did. He was the ultimate religious insider; both his parents were intimately involved in the religious system of their time. He left home, left the temple, left the

holy city, acquired a very funky wardrobe, and took up a diet of grasshoppers and honey. Talk about going beyond your mind and your old way of life!

When the people at the riverside want to claim their pedigree as children of Abraham and lean on that, he tells them that's not enough. It's not enough to know who your ancestors were, who your people are. You must know something more about yourself and more about the Holy One than where you were born, where you went to school, or how much money you make. And talking about congregations, there has to be more than we are the oldest congregation of any kind south of St Augustine and we are, along with neighboring St Peter's, the southernmost Episcopal outpost. Those things are true, and they're great, and I love them. And they're not enough. We have to move into the future. We have to be transformed, each of us and all of us.

The signs that we are moving beyond the mind with which we started include that we depend less upon ourselves and more on God. We lean less upon our ideas and more upon the Holy One. We think less *about* ourselves but not less *of* ourselves or anyone else. We discern our work in this season, and we do it faithfully and with intention. We do our part, and we leave the rest to God, for it is God in Christ, not we, who is sovereign in the process.

Metanoia. Change your mind. Go beyond your mind. Think again.

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In third grade, my teacher was Miss Nelle Fisher. She was legendarily both creative and strict. We knew she cared about us and our learning; and therefore, she was beloved. During that school year, she read aloud to us every day. One of the books we listened to read in her lovely drawl was *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White. Do you know the story of Charlotte the spider, Wilbur the pig, and all the other animals on Zuckerman's farm?

Here's the redux: Wilbur comes to understand that he is being fattened up to be Christmas dinner. He says repeatedly, "I don't want to die."

A spider named Charlotte with some help from a sneaky rat named Templeton and various other unlikely animal compatriots decide to cooperate and collaborate to save Wilbur's life. Charlotte weaves word messages into her web that get the attention of Mr Zuckerman, the farmer, and ultimately many more people as well.

Spiders, rats, pigs, sheep and lambs, geese and goslings: it's a pretty ragtag, unlikely assembly working together for a common goal. They don't even particularly like each other. What holds them together and allows them to collaborate is a common identified purpose—the why of what they are doing.

Not so different, really, from the peaceable kingdom, the harmonious realm described by the prophet Isaiah in our first reading. Wolves and lambs, leopards and baby goats, lions and baby cows, big cows and bears, baby humans and venomous snakes, and lions changing their diets even more than John the Baptizer and becoming straight-up vegetarians. All these critters, including human ones, natural enemies of one another, able to live together in a new way.

Transformation will have indeed occurred when we see that all over. And in the meantime, which sometimes is a mean time, the reading from Romans echoes this situation for human followers of Jesus as Paul writes to them to welcome each other as Christ has welcomed them. Not because of warm and fuzzy feelings; not because of pedigree; but because Christ has welcomed all of them and all of us.

St Paul concludes this fifteenth chapter a prayer for the branch of the Jesus movement in Rome, *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Hope, joy, peace, power: those are Advent words.

And this season of Advent is a holy season that invites us to balance the high-glare, high-intensity illumination of our lives with holy darkness, to take a break from light pollution and remember that we need both light and darkness. The earth and all her creatures depend on light following dark following light following dark. And Advent allows us to remember that the shorter days and longer darkness of our hemisphere in this season is a blessing. For in the deepest darkness is always where fresh radiance begins.

The third word message that Charlotte the spider weaves into her web in the barnyard community's effort to save Wilbur the pig is this word: *radiant*. That's a good word for us today. The armor of light we explored last week, the spiritual armor that fits each of us, is radiant. It illuminates our environment by illuminating us. This beautifully decorated worship space is radiant. I've been saying for weeks now that we must pace ourselves in the rush to Christmas all around us. The great number of activities and events of such goodwill and good cheer are fabulous and exhausting. This place holds space for us to catch our breath and experience that holy radiance.

I like to do my best to practice what I preach. So, I've been saying take a breath and be in Advent. And this morning, silence will not only follow the sermon, but silence will be part of the sermon.

We're going to turn off almost all the electric lights and take just a few minutes of silence without words together. Find something lovely in this space that speaks to you, and let your mind rest in God. Rest in the radiant darkness of Advent and ask God to help you change your mind.