

“An Opportunity For Something Better”

Rev. David Gregory

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Advent 2



Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist
James Tissot

Readings

Luke 3:2-4

adapted from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

John, Zachariah's son, out in the desert place, received a message from God. He went all through the country around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of change and forgiveness, as described in the words of Isaiah the prophet:

Thunder in the desert!
Prepare for the arrival!
Make the road smooth and straight!
Every ditch will be filled in,
Every bump smoothed out,
The detours straightened out,
All the ruts paved over.
Everyone will be there to see
The parade of God's deliverance.

Pema Chödrön

in her book *Practicing Peace in Times of War*

When you open yourself to the continually changing, impermanent, dynamic nature of your own being and of reality, you increase your capacity to love and care about other people and your capacity to not be afraid. You're able to keep your eyes open, your heart open, and your mind open. And you notice when you get caught up in prejudice, bias, and aggression. You develop an enthusiasm for no longer watering those negative seeds, from now until the day you die. And you begin to think of your life as offering endless opportunities to start to do things differently.

When Pema Chodron published *Practicing Peace In Times of War* some fifteen years ago, most of us would have said that we were living in unprecedented times. We were five years out from 9/11, with thousands of troops in the Middle East in the midst of two long wars, and the torture of war criminals sanctioned by the government. There was racial tension and unrest at home, increased polarization in our political system, and the availability of a new social media platform that most of us had never heard of called Facebook. It is true, the times were unprecedented, and it has only accelerated from there.

Pema Chodron is an American Tibetan Buddhist nun, a prolific author and speaker who has the ability to make sense within the swirling anxieties of post-modern life. And when I found this piece of hers in our Advent Reader last week, I immediately latched onto it. She is someone I used to read a lot. Her words invited me home to some of her other writings, and I'm glad to be back.

It is often said that the older we get, the more we resist change. I'm not sure if that's true, or if it is something that can be reduced to a function of aging itself. All I can do is to take a look at my own adaptability—or the lack of it—and read my own energy around it. It's all about the permanence of change itself. Within the mystery of the Advent season itself is the prospect of change. You cannot read the gospels without seeing the sorry state of the world as experienced by the Jewish peasant class. They were locked into a crisis that involved religion, politics, culture and economics. Nothing seemed to change; indeed, changing the status quo seemed impossible. A powerless people look for something outside themselves to bring them the deliverance they need. Simply put, they looked for a Messiah. And for some people gathered in the wilderness by the Jordan River, there was a messianic hope suggested in the preaching of a highly unusual messenger named John, the cousin of Jesus, who invited people down into the water for a baptism of repentance and forgiveness.

This ritual washing was highly symbolic. It marked the desire to throw off the past and emerge into a new and vital future, a "new birth" of spiritual energy and wisdom that might carry them forward, that might attune them to the words and actions of another messenger who was soon to follow. I know that it's easy to stumble over the word "repentance." Most religions at one time or another have used the concept as a tool of shame and control. Based on various religious and moral codes comes the message that you have to change your evil ways, or ... *watch out!* because, "God is gonna get you for that!"

It will help if we can take the word "repentance" and peel back the layers of shame and guilt and control from it. If we get to the core of the Koine Greek word *metanoia*, translated as "repentance," we see that simply understood, it means *change*. The root meaning is that we are traveling one direction and we shift trajectory and travel another. It is a "turning around" and going in a new direction. So we might say that John was preaching a baptism of change, likened to a snake that sheds its skin and moves forward in a newer, fresher, lighter way than before, losing what is no longer needed and finding new energy for what lies ahead.

Last week we took some time to ask ourselves why we keep coming back here, what it is about church that has kept some of us here regularly for years and for decades. One explanation is that here at CCC we've shed our need for absolution. We've let go of the baggage of original sin, and reveled in the joy of original blessing instead. We've allowed ourselves to live with the questions that most people are afraid or unwilling to ask. We've wandered into the heretical and pushed the

boundaries. It's in the DNA of this place to do this, and it's in our own DNA as well. Pema Chodron invites us to open ourselves to the impermanent, dynamic, nature of our own being and of reality itself, to find endless opportunities to do things differently.

It was thirty-two years ago last month that the Berlin Wall came down. That's half my lifetime ago. I have a vivid memory of a phone conversation I had with my mother as all this was happening. She spoke of how hopeful it was to see a new world coming into being. It seemed to arrive unexpectedly, and it was jaw-dropping to see people moving freely in both directions through the Brandenburg Gate. For a few moments it seemed as though anything was possible. It seemed as though there could be peace. There was a prospect that life could go back to some kind of "normal," that people could finally get along and show respect for one another, acknowledge their disagreements and move on. Then came the First Gulf War. Then 9/11. Then Afghanistan. Then Iraq again. These all reminded us that there are walls that are much higher than the one we used to see in Berlin that was just simple bricks and mortar. These are walls of power, of control, of resistance, and of hatred. And as in those days, we're kind of back in the messianic mode, supposing that we need something or someone outside of ourselves to come in and fix the mess that we're in. Except that this mess we are in is simply called "life," and all of life is lived in the present moment. There is no place else for us to be. There isn't an escape to a world where everything stays the same, where life is neat and tidy and idyllic, and all our worries are over.

Mary and Elizabeth, John and Jesus, these were the harbingers of an entirely new dynamic. The gospel writers called it the "kingdom of heaven," and everywhere that Jesus went, it was said to be "at hand." The iron curtain of oppression was falling. They could see it, feel it, smell it, taste it, touch it. Peace was incarnated in this one who walked among them. It was three years of teaching, healing, feeding, forgiving. It was a baptism of change. And it was impermanent as if to teach us that life is a journey and not a destination. The disciples would have thought it just grand if the Kingdom of David could have been restored to them in a moment. It wasn't. There was a crucifixion. There was persecution. There was infighting and turmoil. And for the last two thousand years, the only permanent thing to present itself has been change: *metanoia*, repentance. And in this place of repentance is the constant opportunity for something better.

It all happens inside of us. The messianic hope isn't satisfied by the next new leader. The political winds will always blow one way and then another. There isn't a political solution. Ecclesiastical trends will come and go. There isn't an ecclesiastical solution. Technology will take us long distances, but it will never be enough. There isn't a technological solution. It's time to shed the old skin and make friends with change, and allow the dynamic of the Holy Spirit to infuse us with something deeper, higher, broader and stronger than any wall that humanity can build. May we find an opportunity for something better. May we find peace. May we be at peace. May we live in peace.