

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 4, 2016

One of my favorite memories of the holiday season was about 15 years ago, when I took my niece to Hershey Park's Candyland. As we walked into the park, my hand holding her little one, through the archway of a zillion twinkling white lights, her eyes grew wide with amazement, her spirit grew full of wonder, and her body grew alert to all the sounds and sights of the holidays. We dashed to the reindeer petting zoo, stroking their soft fur, imagining Santa's sleigh being pulled by this reindeer, this one right in front of us, munching on hay, turning its head to the sound of my niece's gentle voice. The sweetness of the gooey marshmallow which topped our cups of hot chocolate brought tears of joy to our eyes, and we were off on an adventure. There were a limited number of rides available, which suited me just fine, for it seemed the scary, heart-thumping rides were closed so we rode the kinder, gentler ones for hours. We settled in mainly on the carousel. The circus-like music enthralled us, the up and down movement of the wooden painted horses mesmerized us and, with each turn, our excitement peaked. What would be next? What would we see around this corner? We went around and around and around so many times that we began to know what to expect at each quarter turn, knowing when the ticket booth would suddenly come into sight and when, at another turn, the path to the Cocoa Corner would entice us to return for another chocolate delight. We learned what to expect at each turn and the excitement of the newness of the sights began to be replaced by the comfort which familiar sights, places, or experiences can offer us.

Sometimes I think church-going can be very much like a carousel ride. The music can enthrall us, the ritual of the service, the movement of the body, the standing, sitting, and kneeling can mesmerize us, there can be moments of excitement such as those when we're about ready to receive the body and blood of Christ, and there can be a great deal of comfort in knowing the routine of what to expect, what's around the next corner, or in the next part of the service.

We come to church to be refreshed, restored, renewed, and it happens because we go around the carousel. We go through the service, again and again, and our hearts anticipate the forgiveness, nourishment, and the abiding Spirit we receive each week. This is good; one of the purposes of our liturgy and one of the gifts of being a part of the body of Christ. Comfort through the familiarity of being renewed to meet the world again, only to return the following week, is part of the gift the Church offers us.

However, the startling and fiery message of John the Baptist we heard in our gospel story today is calling us into something else, something deeper, something which prepares us for our connection to Jesus' resurrection. For this is also what we come to church for: tapping into the resurrection of Jesus and being changed, being offered new life, seeing life in a brand-new way. This goes beyond refreshment, restoration, and renewal. Resurrection involves complete change and is included in John's message through the word repentance.

At the time when John spouted the wrathful command “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near”, repent did not carry the meaning we often attach to it now, that of contrition for sins. In the Hebrew language at the time, it meant return, especially the return from exile. We can discern this meaning in the action of the prodigal son. At the moment when the text says, “he turned unto himself”, we can substitute the word repented, for it means the son returned from the exile of being a false self, someone other than who God created him to be. He returned from the exile of falsehood and he returned from the exile he imposed upon his family with his previous departure.

But what’s really interesting to me is the Greek translation of the word repent at that time, which is, “go beyond the mind that you have”. Now, isn’t that interesting, that repent involves a stretching of the mind and an embracing of a new perspective. John’s fiery command is saying, “Stretch. Reach. Be open. Look for something new, for the Kingdom of God is coming soon”.

When I used to teach Sunday School, I always told the children that repent meant “turning around,” which gets us to the same place of going beyond the mind you have. For in whatever situation you find yourself, John is saying: “turn around and look at it from another point of view.” It may still be hard. It may still be broken. It may still be troubling, but by your movement, you may suddenly perceive it differently, and that’s where new life happens. We train ourselves to acquire a new perspective when we study the parables, for it is always good practice to imagine yourself as each of the characters. It forces you to look at the situation from all perspectives. This spiritual practice is particularly helpful when we find ourselves confused, distraught, or deeply hurt, or when our souls are weary from living a life that really doesn’t fit. When we turn around and look at it from another person’s point of view, clarity and insight often emerge, and compassion follows. I think this is John’s point. When we go beyond the mind we have, when we turn around and look at the situation with fresh eyes, compassion happens and then we will then see the Kingdom of God, which is near.

But this means getting off the carousel, wanting more than renewal and comfort, and living into the prayer that God would “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength”, as we pray in one of our Eucharistic prayers, asking for the strength needed to go beyond the mind we have, to see the in-breaking of the Kingdom, which is before us. This means going on the scary and heart-thumping rides which I really always wanted to avoid at Hershey Park: the roller coasters, where one unexpected turn happened after another, where screams and shouts seemed to be the only natural response, and we lost our breath along the way. This is the life John the Baptist is calling us into.

John went out into the wilderness, into the places where people’s souls were tested, where, as we read in the classic, “Where the Wild Things Are” by Maurice Sendak, there is roaring of terrible roars, gnashing of terrible teeth, rolling of terrible eyes, and showing of terrible claws. It is in this wild and terrible place that John proclaimed his challenging message of repentance. Perhaps people flocked to him because they were tired of their carousel, of their lives or religion which had become meaningless by familiarity or was corrupted by outside forces, such

as the Roman oppression. They were ready for a change, of a return to a life with God. They were ready to get off the merry-go-round, take on a new perspective, one that would lead to a new way of life that had purpose and was grounded in God.

John's invitation to us can be to step off the merry-go-round of our life for a bit, to turn around, to consider the perspective of others, to imagine a new way of being, to stretch our minds for the coming of Jesus. John's invitation to us can be to walk into the wilderness, to look in the hard places, to explore the dark crevices of our souls, to crawl into the places of hurt, to sit awhile, until we can see it from a different perspective, where new life can emerge. Because the Kingdom of God is near. That's the message of Advent.

Do you remember what Mother Carenda said in one of her sermons, "God loves us too much to leave us where we are". This line has stuck with me because it's born of the wisdom of God and it is what gives us the courage to walk "where the wild things are" because there we will meet the Spirit of God.

John the Baptist could draw people into the wilderness, into the unknown, into the unhospitable places, into the Judean Desert, or into the depths of their souls, because the Kingdom of God was near. Jesus was right around the corner. Jesus who would bring the gift of the Holy Spirit to everyone. John's followers, (until Jesus was baptized and the Holy Spirit appeared,) did this work alone, often returning again and again to go beyond the mind they had, until they could be ready to embrace what Jesus offered them. We don't do this work alone. We do it with the Holy Spirit, given to us in our baptism, and with our connection to Jesus' resurrection through the Holy Eucharist.

The refrain of our Song of Praise, The Song of Mary, speaks of this turning we are all asked to do, this going beyond the mind we have, so we can move into a place of compassion, where we will find the kingdom of God.

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.  
Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears,  
For the dawn draws near.  
And the world is about to turn.

Let us be a part of the turning toward the Kingdom of God.