ADVENT TWO, YEAR A, DECEMBER 7, 2025

On this second Sunday of Advent we lit the candle of peace. This is a season for thinking of peace and reflecting on peace. We think of the message of the angels of "Peace on earth, good will to all people."

But while we read and sing and focus on peace there is an elephant in the room. Or to be more accurate, there is a locust-eating, camel skin-wearing, fire and brimstone preaching prophet in the room named John the Baptist. The curmudgeonly prophet raises his voice and lets us have it: "You brood of vipers!" "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

If you're looking for a peaceful sentiment, John isn't going to provide it. There's nothing gentle or saccharine about him. *"You brood of vipers!"* Repent. Wake up. Bear fruit.

When John the Baptist comes in from the wilderness toward the Jordan and appears on the margins, he is a counter-cultural force. It's clear that he doesn't care about pleasing his culture or the powers that be. He's given up all of that. What he is after is what the Greek text in Matthew calls *metanoia*, and what the English so often feebly translates as "repentance."

The word that John the Baptist utters is really *metanoiete,* which is a Greek word that has two roots. *Meta* means to "go beyond," and *noia* is a form of the Greek word which is often translated as "mind." So *metanoiete* could better be translated as "go beyond your mind," "transcend yourself." When St. Jerome was translating the Greek text into Latin, he didn't think it was his job to translate the Greek as closely as possible. Instead, he sought to improve upon the Greek with his superior Latin understanding, so when he encountered *metanoiete*, he translated it as "Do penance," or as it became in English, "repent." And so it has been ever since.

But think about that for a moment. There's a certain richness that we've lost with that translation. The Greek word suggests a kind of transformation that the Latin does not even imagine. To "go beyond your mind" takes you into a way of being and seeing in the world that at first is unimaginable but eventually becomes a source of tremendous comfort and healing. It means inviting uncertainty and the unknown into your life and letting it change you.

John the Baptist wasn't asking people to convert to a different religion. He was asking, even demanding, that they make a radical change in their way of seeing and acting in the world, that they "bear fruit worthy" of this *metanoia.*

It's also not accidental that John chose to live in the wilderness. There is something to be said about living in and absorbing the beauty and awesomeness of the wilderness. Wilderness doesn't necessarily mean desert either. It can be any wild place even urban areas. When the gospels talk about John the Baptist and the wilderness they are also telling us that he is declaring that the promised Kingdom and the promised Anointed One will come through the wilderness. In other words the Kingdom of God arrives in a wild landscape. A wild landscape in which metanoia – a change of ones mind can happen.

How many of you have ever spent time in the desert or in a place that is devoid of all the trappings around you like chatter, music, light pollution, people scurrying around and you are left alone with yourself in quietness where you can let your mind expand and

explore? If you have spent time in a desert or wilderness place there is a definite oneness that you begin to experience with your surroundings. It's a place where seeing and going beyond one's mind is possible.

A number of years ago I spent some weeks in a place called Quartzite in Arizona that is home to wintering RVer's. In fact the 2020 movie, Nomadland, was filmed there. The vast expanse of wide open space is dotted with cacti and wildflowers with mountains in the distance. At night the only light that is visible is that of the moon and millions of stars. It is beyond breathtaking to feel that the sky and earth become one and you are just this little spec that is privileged to be a part of it all. It feels surreal yet life giving and life changing.

Too often we rush through life, running here and there, worrying about so many things that we forget to take the time to just absorb the beauty in the simplest of things around us. Taking the time allows us to see life differently, have a change of heart. There is something to be said to have the opportunity to go beyond our mind as John the Baptist call us to do.

An artist Kevin Fitzgerald describes his paintings this way. "*"The landscape, both cultivated and wild, can serve as a reminder of the beauty and power that exists beyond our grasp. There is always something happening in the landscape before us, and something is always about to happen… For an instant we feel the presence of the miracle once again, allowing itself to be revealed."* It's an invitation to look for the power of beauty around us.

Jane Goodall, the biologist and great champion of apes recounted the effect that her time spent with chimpanzees in Tanzania had on her. She described what we would call metanoiete. She wrote, "All the time I was getting closer to animals and nature, I was, as a result, closer to myself and more and more in tune with the spiritual power that I felt all around. For those who have experienced the joy of being alone with nature there is really little need for me to say much more; for those who have not, no words of mine can ever describe the powerful, mystical knowledge of beauty and eternity that come, suddenly and unexpected.

She continued, "The beauty was always there, but moments of true awareness were rare. They would come, unannounced; perhaps when I was watching the pale flush preceding dawn; or looking up through the rustling leaves of some giant forest tree into the greens and browns and the black shadows and the occasionally ensnared bright fleck of blue sky; or when I stood, as darkness fell, with one hand on the still-warm trunk of a tree and looked at the sparkling of an early moon on the never still, softly sighing water of Lake Tanganyika."

Those experiences of spiritual awakening convinced her that there was a powerful force of love at work in the universe and she heard in that, as well, a call to action that led to her transformative work across the globe.

The possibility of *metanoia* is available to all of us, all the time. It is a force that is inextricably connected to both love and to mercy. It is as Goodall says, "always there." Like John the Baptist, its transformative power and uses is no less available to each of us this Advent season. And we don't just find them in the desert. Thomas Merton, theologian and mystic wrote about an experience he had in the middle of downtown Lousiville. "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, … that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. All of

a sudden it was if I could see the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach the core of their reality. If only every person could realize that this is the core of their reality as God sees them. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed

On this Sunday of peace, Advent reminds us of not only of the coming of God-with-us but that it means God is with us everywhere, at all times, in every place whether it is the barrenness of the deserts of our hearts or the howling cacophony of the cities that try to drown out our souls – the peace of God is ever present.

So let us continue to live into the hope of Advent even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage that real peace is found in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.