

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA

The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge

Church Year A

12/4/16

Advent 2

Matthew 3:1-12, Romans 15:4-13, Isaiah 11:1-10

These are some strange times we're living in, my dear friends. I can't tell you how many people I've sat with in my office or over coffee or run into at QFC or bumped into around here who are feeling it. Sometimes the presenting issue is our recent contentious election and the fractured relationships that people are experiencing. But, you know, I think that's just a symptom of something deeper that's going on. The **dis-ease** that people are experiencing is about change. Change, of course, can be both positive and negative.

"The times they are a-changing." That's the old civil-rights-era song written by our newest Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan, and it captured something very important and real about the mid-sixties. Times were changing and the old order was being asked to give way to a new one. Those lyrics also recognized a fundamental companion of change: turbulence. Change, whether positive, negative, or some combination of the two, which is often the case, always is accompanied by turbulence. And let's face it, turbulence creates anxiety. And anxiety often causes us to act out. Nerves get frayed. Relationships become tense. We find ourselves saying and doing things that we wouldn't normally be saying or doing in more peaceful, less stressful times.

So maybe we can lessen the anxiety and the acting out that the turbulence of change brings with it by reminding ourselves that change is constant. Every morning when we get out of bed, we will encounter a world that has changed and a self that has changed, if in no other way than remembering that we have drawn another day closer to our deaths. Another day closer to the exhaustion of our physical bodies.

"Now, wait a minute," you say; "Am I supposed to feel better when you remind me that every day is a day closer to my death?" Well, it depends on your perspective. We can either deny it and run away from it, or we can accept it and live in the reality about our deaths. It's our choice. But whether we choose to live in denial or in acceptance, the fact that you and I will each eventually die is an unchangeable fact. So let's put that on the table. The real question is not, "Will I live in this body in this world forever?" The answer to that is, "No." The real question, in fact, among the most fundamental questions you will ever encounter in your life is this: "What am I going to do between this very moment and the moment of my death, as uncertain as the exact 'when' of that may be?"

We hear the answer to that question this morning from a voice crying out in the wilderness 2,000 years ago. "Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." This

crazy, scary, bug-eyed guy from another time and another place has something of extreme urgency to tell us about life and death. The first step, the step that can't be avoided in preparation for new life, what I'm going to call the Big Life, is to repent.

Now, "repent" is a funny word. We often associate it with TV preachers or gospel tent revivalists and so we dismiss it, or at best, think it just means saying, "I'm sorry." But "sorry" is just a start. The word that gets translated into English as "repent" is the Greek word *metanoia*. It literally means "to turn around." "Turn your life around," the Baptist cries. Change your life. Move away from sleep-walking. Quit medicating yourself with whatever it is you're medicating yourself with. There is something in you—and something in me and in all of us—that's waiting to be born. I don't care how old you are. What is it? You probably already know, but maybe haven't said it out loud. Or you have said it out loud, but haven't acted on it yet. I don't know what it is for you, but you do. You know, among the saddest words you could ever speak with your dying breath would be, "If only I had..." If only I had done what I really felt called to do. If only I had been more conscious and intentional about nurturing and deepening my relationships with my family, my friends, my community. If only I had been brave enough to stand up when I saw injustice. If only I had been humble enough to admit my mistakes and my brokenness and made amends.

My dear friends, today is the day. This is the moment. It's given to very few of us to know how much time we have left between now and the hour of our death. So get started. You don't have a minute to lose. How will you begin to change your life so you won't find yourself at the hour of your death filled with regrets about lost chances and missed opportunities and unfulfilled dreams. Repent. Turn around.

That's living the Big Life. And it's the Big Life that continues on after the death of our physical bodies. It's Big Life that God wants for you and that you want for yourself. The Big Life, the Kingdom of Heaven that the Baptist is going on and on about, is right here.

Now here's another related piece for us to consider in these turbulent times of change, times that are as turbulent as those the Baptist lived in. The Baptist called for his listeners to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Another way of putting that is, "**Be** the change you want to see."

How can I live more peacefully and faithfully and intentionally in the midst of all this turbulence? Well, since this is a sermon, you won't be surprised to hear that I have a couple of suggestions.

First, deepen your faith. Read the Bible. Every day. Let Jesus, God's Living Word, be the pattern for your life. Read the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1-13. Every day. Let go of

being certain that you're right about this or that, and practice reflection. Don't just state your faith. Practice it. Be brave. Be humble. Let go of your tribal identity and replace it with your faith identity. Be an unapologetic Christian.

Second, love your neighbor. Don't hate your neighbor. Love your neighbor. Stand up for them. Part of what I've been experiencing in the midst of all this turbulence is what we call in the south a lot of "bad mouthing." Being super-critical of others who have different views or who may have done something you find irritating. I've heard a lot of that lately. And it comes from not only every—and I mean every—corner of the political spectrum, it's in the more everyday parts of our lives too. There's a kind of "tetchiness"—there's another good southern word—in the air; a hypersensitivity that leads to people being cross and unkind to each other. I heard someone sigh the other day, "Can't we give each other just a little more grace?" So love your neighbor and cut them some slack.

Third, listen to each other. God alone knows the whole truth. And that means I don't. So if we want to continue to grow in relationships outside our particular tribes, we need to listen respectfully and actively to other people and other points of view. That's called sacred listening, and that's the beginning of healing wounds. Your church home needs to be a sacred space where our stories can be shared and our differences held and respected. This is sacred and loving space.

So here's fruit worthy of repentance. Let Jesus be the pattern for your life. It's not that hard to understand, although it will be the work of a lifetime. Love your neighbor and be kind to her. Don't hate on her. Listen to your neighbor. He might have something to teach you. Be brave. Say your prayers and then do whatever it takes—and you'll know what it is—to live your life so you don't look back at the end and say, "If only..."

This is how we live through the turbulence of change. It means dying some small deaths. Deaths to our egoic desires. Deaths to our impulses to act out in irritation or to turn our frustrations inward towards depression. Moving forward through the turbulence, we can fall into the Big Life which is life with God. It's from that place, the place of living life fully and completely that we'll know that even the deaths of our physical bodies is just one more small death.

When we know we have experienced the stream of life, the Big Life, we can lie on our deathbeds like St. Francis and say, "Welcome, sister death." I'm not afraid to let go of life because **I have life**. I am life. I know that life eternal—so broad and so deep that it can even contain death—and another life—a bigger life—is waiting for me. Amen.