

The change we long for

God of the keen blade, which cuts the roots of arrogant power: you raise voices of promise in the dry lands of our desire, children of faith from the stones of the earth; make us ready to receive the Spirit and the fire of love, wild and fierce and free; through Jesus Christ, the one who is and is to come. Amen.

A Collect for Advent 2A, Prayers for an Inclusive Church, page 2

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12 (Advent 2A)

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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor;' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

When was the last time you changed because someone told you had to?

Better yet, when was the last time you changed because some crazy person you happened to run into told you to?

Personally, probably never.

Truthfully, I have a hard time changing even when *I* tell *myself* I

have to....

And yet, I do often long for change.

Yesterday, our diocese elected a new bishop after about a two-year process... and ideas of change were a big part of the discussion... but, who knows what will come of those ideas?

Often I have a vision or a dream for change – for myself, for our life here

together in this faith community, for our area, our nation, our world....

So in our scripture today, in the gospel reading we encounter one of the great figures and images of Advent, who is John the Baptist, the voice of one crying in the wilderness... not on Twitter, not in theological textbooks or in institutional or civil structures... but in the wilderness, from the margins.

Hard to ignore but easy to dismiss.

John's message in the wilderness included both a call for change and for making space for the coming of Jesus, the always new work of God in flesh, as a human being.

While "repent" is a word with a lot of baggage, it simply means turning around, adjusting course.

We often approach change as "all or nothing" – a complete makeover – and thus more likely *not* something we are going to do – the change to which we are called is not reasonably a temporary project that can be accomplished either quickly or completely.

The space God needs to come to us, to be with us is similarly an ongoing challenge, especially in our over-full lives, in which all available time and attention can now be sucked up not only by consumer goods but by the technology that is always at hand to fill every idle moment.

While the gospel reading reports great crowds going out to John: "the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan," and there were likely noticeable gatherings to hear his radical call, many simply went on as we all do from whatever momentary distraction catches our attention... and John, like so much, became just

cocktail conversation.

So Advent is a moment for us.

It is a moment that reveals a reality that is always present, always possible.

It is not just when a crazy man called for repentance millennia ago: transformation, letting in the dream, is always possible, is always calling to us... and yes, this is a constant primary component of the larger dream of God for us and for all.

It is part of our potential as human beings... even when we are most discouraged and least motivated.

And the essential link of John's message with Jesus and the reality that God is constantly coming to us, constantly with us – not just at Christmas – can open our minds, our hearts, our relationships to the undying love of God for us, for humanity, that is the essence of the Christ Spirit that is our legacy, our ongoing gift in Jesus.

We don't change because someone tells us to.

We don't make space in our lives easily, quickly or once and for all... but being human does allow us to reorient ourselves to what we care about most deeply – to respond to the largeness of love in our lives and in the whole world – in all of reality – and to be loving, not just as emotion but as action that is truly transformative – not just for us but for all the communities in which we live.

This Advent, may we more and more awaken to the change we long for... and can have in the life of God with us.