

Apparently there is a man who works for the Postal Service, whose job is to process all the mail that has illegible addresses. Last year, a letter came to his desk addressed in shaky handwriting to God. He thought he should open it to see what it was about. He read these words; “Dear God, I am a 93-year-old widow, living on a very small pension. Yesterday someone stole my purse. It had \$100 in it, which was all the money I had until my next pension check. Next Sunday is Christmas, and I had invited two of my friends over for dinner. Without that money, I have nothing to buy food with. I have no family to turn to, and you are my only hope. Can you please help me? Sincerely, Edna.”

The postal worker was touched. He showed the letter to his fellow workers. Each of them dug into their wallets and came up with a few dollars. By the time he made the rounds, he had collected \$96, which he put into an envelope and sent to the woman. The rest of the day, all of the workers felt a warm glow for the kind deed they had done.

Christmas came and went. A few days later another letter came from the old lady addressed to God. All of the workers gathered around while the letter was opened. It read: “Dear God, How can I ever thank you enough for what you did for me? Because of your gift of love, I was able to fix a glorious dinner for my friends. We have a very nice day and I told my friends of your wonderful gift. By the way, there was \$4 missing. I think it must have been those thieves at the Post Office. Sincerely, Edna.” (KING DUNCAN, DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2017, p. 63)

OK, let’s look at the gospel. There is a lot packed into the opening sentence of today’s Gospel. To appreciate how shocking it would be, here would be a modern translation: “In the 2nd year of the presidency of Donald J. Trump, while Michael Pompeo was Secretary of State, while Roy Cooper was governor of North Carolina, during the episcopacy of Luis Rafael Zarama, the Word of God came to an earthworm farmer named Billy Bob on the outskirts of Apex, North Carolina.” God’s Word bypassed all of those people with power and influence, and came to a relatively unknown, powerless person like John the Baptist. (idea from LECTIOAID, Dec 06-Feb 07, p. 6)

Luke goes to great lengths to locate the ministry of John and Jesus within the time frame of history marked by the figures who were in power at the time. I won’t bore you with the historical details, but it was an unusually stable time in Judea as far as Rome was concerned. The Jewish king, Herod, and the high priest, Caiphas, were both in the pocket of the Roman governor Pilate, and the governor was no fool. Little did anyone suspect that the most destabilizing force in human history was about to be unleashed in this most efficient and tranquil hour of Roman rule.

John announced the end of business-as-usual for the Empire – and for all empires as far as that goes. Though Pilate would never be aware of him, John burst out of the desert to declare the straightening of God’s road once and for all. A new kingdom was about to be born – with a new King. Rome’s apparently smooth route to empire was about to become rather bumpy, because an uncontrollable power was about to be revealed. As valleys rose and mountains bowed down to make straight the path of God’s salvation road, the powers that be would find their own way increasingly encumbered. A new kingdom was about to be born – with a new King, Jesus. Within less than 500 years the mighty Roman Empire will have fallen, and Christianity will have spread throughout the then-known world.

Which is the gospel’s way of telling all empires to take note. No matter how stable the governments may seem, despite the apparent success of their tactics, the heart of a new kingdom is already beating in our midst. The way of a new king is being cleared, and that process will be a winnowing for all, especially the rich

and powerful. So what seems like a mere bit of history in this introductory sentence, is a powerful theological statement about the kingdom of God that was about to break upon the world.

So second, we have been given a warning – change is afoot. What do we do? Mostly we ignore it – because we are too busy doing our Christmas shopping, baking, decorating, entertaining, partying, rushing, dashing, crashing.....There is a very real slice of life from Bill Amend's daily newspaper comic strip FOXTROT (Sept 12, 2006) Middle-aged spouses Roger and Andy Fox are sitting in their living room in front of the television set. In the first panel, Andy, feeling a bit melancholy, asks her husband: "Ever feel like life is just zipping by? That the clock is ticking and there's no turning back? That every second that passes is a precious second you'll never see again?" In the final panel, Roger turns from the television to his wife: "I'm sorry, could you repeat that? I was watching the beer commercial." Andy sinks her face deep into her hands and says, "Never mind."

John the Baptizer makes his annual Advent appearance to get us to snap out of our stupor and busyness and obliviousness to the life that's happening all around us: to turn off our TV sets and computers, put down our spreadsheets and calendars and I-phones, unplug our laptops – and look around – and behold – the reality of God – present in our midst. The same Word that came to John in the desert comes to each of us in the deserts of our own hearts, enabling us to straighten the winding roads of our lives in the compassion and justice of God. In this wonderful season of Advent, the Word comes again to live among us in the person of Christ. But will we re-arrange our lives enough that He can find His way in?

And so my third point, repentance. There's a whole lot of talk in our culture that the goal of life is to shoot for the top – to be number one. We convince ourselves that the goal of life is to aspire for positions of power. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we shouldn't try to be good at what we do, to do it well, and to be successful in our working endeavors. But we need to keep it all in perspective. Work is not the only area where we need to direct our attention. Most of us get an A+ on work. But what kind of grade do we get on our spirituality? Our prayer? Our forgiveness? Our compassion and care for the poor, the needy, the environment? What about our generosity? Our love? When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, as he waded in the muddy waters of the Jordan River, he challenged all of our cultural assumptions. He did that by bellowing over and over a message of repentance. In Greek the word for 'repentance' is *metanoia*. Quite literally *metanoia* means to 'change your mind' or more precisely 'to change your way of thinking.'

During this Advent season, are we prepared to change the way we think? Ah, there is the challenge. Just listen to our political discourse – and we get an idea of how closed our minds are – ALL of our minds! Are we even OPEN to changing the way we think? If not, we have no clue about the gospel – because the heart of the gospel is conversion – *metanoia* – changing our minds. And it is a lifelong process of changing again and again and again. Are we going to continue to focus on 'making it to the top' – or will we put GOD at the top? Are we going to continue to insist that everything has to be my way – or are we interested in surrendering to GOD'S way? How can we live our lives in such a way that we never forget that the highest and truest power belongs to God? Are we prepared to spend LESS time working, and MORE time praying? Loving? Spending time with our families and friends? Reflecting on the Scriptures? Serving the poor and needy? Being generous with our time, talent and treasure? Are we at all serious about being Catholic if we give NOTHING to the collection? And yet still expect lights, heat and air conditioning, music, baptism for children/grandchildren, weddings, funerals and visits when we are sick, etc? Is God really number one in our lives? If not, then we need this message of repentance, we need to change our way of thinking – and acting. Someone once said that "If you find God, you find life; if you miss God, you miss the whole point of living." (Kenneth Pillar) There are a whole lot of people in our culture that have missed the whole point of living.

Some of them even come to church! A lot of people seem to have no clue WHY they were put on this earth. They are constantly sowing division, negativity, gossip. How does any of that have anything to do with the Prince of Peace?

The truth is that even if we amass the most – and the most expensive – toys – we STILL DIE! Everybody dies. Do you know the difference between a Russian tragedy and a Russian comedy? In a Russian tragedy – everybody dies. In a Russian comedy – everybody dies – but with smile on face! With death, there will be a judgment for what we have done – and what we have failed to do. God will want to know how we stewarded our time, talent and treasure. We will not be asked if we ever made full professor, became a Corporate VP, or had the most assets and biggest bank account, the most perfect house or were always the best dressed person at a party. But we WILL be asked, “Did you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, comfort the sorrowful?” DID YOU LOVE ME WHEN I CAME TO YOU IN DISGUISE?

Advent is always a tough message in the midst of a fun party season. Which makes the message all the harder to hear. My suggestion is that we all spend some time this week reflecting on WHY we are celebrating in the first place – because a baby born in the backwater part of the Roman empire was a king who wants to rule in our hearts – with a kingdom of love. How goes that rule? How is our heart? Are we known as people of great and forgiving love? All that we need has already been given. It is merely for us to take the time, reflect a bit, and receive it. And then live it. Amen.