On Thanksgiving evening, I asked my smart phone for directions to St. Joseph’s Hospital in Stockton, got in my car, and followed the instructions. The navigator took me down Highway 99 to Wilson Way. I soon realized that this was not the safest way to come, especially at night. A couple weeks ago I headed back to St. Joseph’s Hospital. I did turn on my navigator, but I decided not to go down Highway 99. I headed south on Lower Sacramento Road. I figured that the smart phone would simply recalibrate and figure out a different way to get there. It refused. It told me to make a U-turn and go back to Kettleman. It wanted me to turn left on Harney, then on Armstrong, and on Eight Mile Road. It insisted that I make a U-turn so I could head east to Highway 99. I was on Pacific Avenue before it finally gave up. As if pouting because it didn’t get its way, the navigator wound me through several short residential streets until I finally reached the hospital. Needless to say I found my own way home!

That experience kept coming to mind as I prayed through John the Baptist’s call to change hearts and lives. We hear this call three times:

Vs. 2 “Change your hearts and lives.”

Vs. 8 to the Pharisees and Sadducees: “Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives.”

v. 11 “I baptize with water those who have changed your hearts and lives.”

The phrase reappears at the beginning of Jesus’ active ministry in the next chapter: “From that time Jesus began to announce, ‘Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!’” (4:17).

The traditional word in John’s message is “Repent.” In Hebrew the word means “to turn” or “to return.” It always indicates a change of direction. In the New Testament, the Greek word, metanoia, means “a change of mind.”

To repent is to turn in a new direction because of a change in the way we think or the way we see reality. To repent is to realize that the direction I am going is not going to get me where I ought to be.

You’ve probably heard about the tanker captain who was steering his ship through the fog when he saw a warning light up ahead. He flashed the message, “Change course 10 degrees south.” The reply signal flashed, “Change course 10 degrees north.”
The captain sent back the message, “I am a 240,000 ton tanker. Change your course!” The reply came back, “I am a lighthouse. Change your course.” That’s a change of direction based upon a new perception of reality. Repentance is a continual reorientation of our thinking, a reordering of our priorities, a change of attitude, a realignment of our values to bring our lives in line with the Kingdom of God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It’s what Jesus describes in the parable of the prodigal son who squandered everything his father could give him until “he came to himself,” picked himself up and turned toward home.

It’s what Paul means in the letter to the Romans when he calls us to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

It’s what John Newton means when he teaches us to sing, “I once was blind but now I see.”

Repentance is the continual realignment of our lives based on a growing awareness of God’s will and way for us in Jesus Christ.

But why would we change direction and recalibrate the chosen course of our lives? Both John and Jesus issue the call to repentance because the kingdom of God is at hand. An opportunity is drawing near and we want to be ready to seize it.

Biblical repentance is not so much about how bad things have been, but about how good things could be. It’s not about what we’ve done in the past as much as it is about what we can become in the future. It’s the way we turn from the self-absorbed, sin-corrupted, violence-addicted, greed-obsessed world to become part of God’s life-giving reign, God’s gracious rule inaugurated by Jesus. It’s the way we continue building upon what God did in Jesus Christ and what God continues to do through the Holy Spirit. We change our hearts and lives to prepare for the arrival of the King.

The PBS series, “Upstairs, Downstairs,” was the story of the aristocratic Bellemy family who lived upstairs at Eaton Place and the servants who lived downstairs, presided over by the ever-efficient butler, Mr. Hudson.

One of the memorable episodes was the night that King Edward came for dinner. Hudson had everyone working like crazy, turning the whole house inside out, cleaning and polishing every inch of the place, putting everything in order, all because the king was coming to dinner.
That’s repentance. It’s the process by which we get our lives in order so that the new king can live and reign in us. That’s what John was preaching in the wilderness when, suddenly, he looked up and saw Jesus coming for baptism.

John protested, “Jesus, I should not be baptizing you; you should be baptizing me.” Jesus tells John to take him into the water to fulfill the saving purpose of God. Here’s the way Paul described it to the Corinthians, “God caused the one who didn’t know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The One who needs no repentance goes into the water to identify with every last, lost sinner who does. When he comes up out of the water, we hear the voice of God, “This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him.”

Jesus’ baptism declares that this way of total surrender, of absolute solidarity with sinners, of self-giving love is the way God’s kingdom comes and God’s will gets done on earth as it is in heaven.

The British people have been concerned about the health of their matriarch, Queen Elizabeth. You may remember how deeply the British people loved the Queen Mother, right up until her death at 101 in 2002. They never forgot that during World War II when London was being bombed every night, the King and Queen refused to leave the city. They walked the bombed out streets and looked into the faces of hurting people. When Buckingham Palace was hit, the Queen Mother said, “It makes me feel I can look the East End in the face.”

Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ baptism to say that the king has come into the middle of our broken, confused, misdirected lives. He goes into the river of repentance with us to lead us out of the water into new life under the reign of God. He meets us where we are and takes us in a new direction. That’s the difference Jesus’ makes.

The question for us to ponder this morning is, who is navigating my life? Like John, are we willing to take a back seat to Jesus, even when it means giving up my preferred way? Where’s the point in my life that I need to listen to Jesus’ navigation and turn in a new direction?

That’s the invitation of baptism, and the opportunity in remembering our baptism: to be cleansed of an old way and to rise to the Christ-like way of life. It’s a change in the right direction.

Divine Lover, from the moment of our conception, you have called us your beloved sons and daughters. In your sight, we are precious and honored. We are
blessed by the value you place upon each of our lives. We are blessed that in spite of our imperfections, you work in us and through us.

We give you thanks for Jesus, who became one with us. He identified with our weakness and prompted us to grow toward holiness. As we remember his baptism and ours, cleanse us and clothe us anew that the character of Christ might shine through us.

Help us live out the baptismal covenant we make with one another, to nurture one another in the Christian life and faith. We pray for youth and mentors beginning the process toward confirmation this day. Guide their growth in faith that their relationship with you might deepen. We pray for all who desire to grow in faith, that their hearts and minds might be opened to the transformation and renewal you offer.

Immerse in your healing balm those living with chronic health condition and all recovering from surgery or illness. We pray for comfort for those who are grieving.

Our hearts are with people across our nation experiencing challenges due to stormy weather. We grieve with all who were present and traumatized at the Fort Lauderdale airport last week. Offer them your healing presence. We pray for your divine wisdom for all leaders selected to see our nation into the future. Guide them to fulfill their responsibilities with integrity and compassion.

As we remember our baptism, keep us mindful of the qualities of Christ with which your Spirit desires to cloth us: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love. We unite our voices with Jesus as he taught us to pray...

Rev. Lori Sawdon
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