

Course Corrections  
 December 6, 2009  
 Bonnie A. Perry & Andrea L. Mysen  
 Luke 3:1-6

I propose to show that repentance can take place in baby steps so that those hearing this sermon will be open to making small changes in our lives that can add up to profound change.

Anyone here  
 up for a complete overhaul  
     of your life  
     as you know it?

In that time,  
 when Tiberius  
 and the brothers Herod  
 were ruling,  
 in that time  
     when Pilate was governing  
 and Caphas and Anas and Zechariah were priests,  
 John went into the wilderness  
 near the River Jordan  
 and called on the people,  
 all the people  
 to turn  
     and repent of their sins  
 and come to the water

...Anyone here---  
 in a time when Barak Obama is president,  
 Richie Daly is mayor  
 and Katherine Jefferts Schori is presiding bishop  
 —anyone here  
 up for a complete overhaul of your life  
 —for repenting and returning to the Lord?

My friend Andrea  
 tells of the career day sponsored by her high school  
 —where the school  
 gave you permission  
 to miss a day  
 and go and shadow  
 someone at work  
     to find out all about their job.  
 She remembers

these earnest days  
as marvelous annual opportunities  
to skip school.

But one year when she was a junior  
—the weekend after  
she had dutifully skipped school  
and not explored  
potential career paths  
her father who was an airline pilot  
took her to work.

Actually he was going to sharpen his skills  
on the flight simulator  
and on that day  
he took her along  
to be his “co-pilot”.

Andrea’s dad at that time  
flew the Lockheed 1011  
which,  
she pointed out  
as only a aviator’s daughter can,  
was in its day  
the biggest plane in the air.  
So on that Saturday  
Andrea’s dad took her  
to spend the day in the flight simulator.

She said that sitting in the simulator—  
was remarkably like  
sitting in the cockpit of a plane—  
hence its name---  
with the controls,  
the dials,  
and the scenery outside the window.

First things first –  
-before taking off  
her Dad gave her  
the compulsory explanation of all the dials—  
what they meant  
and how to read them  
—the air speed indicator,  
the altimeter,  
the turn and bank indicator,

the magnetic compass,  
the rate of climb indicator,  
and the artificial horizon  
were just a few that stood out to her.

After the crash course on the dials,  
they start the plane  
and run through  
The pre-flight check list  
—taxie out to the runway—  
-get clearance for takeoff—  
and up up and away they go.

She said,  
as you might imagine  
the whole thing moves  
so it feels completely and utterly real—  
as you start down the runway  
the plane shakes,  
the cockpit tilts  
and the graphic images  
of the ground drops away.

Then  
the calm—  
of being in the air  
apart from the ground—  
flying—as it were.

Her Dad,  
being the experienced pilot  
gets them  
to the proper cruising altitude  
and then turns and asks  
if she wants  
to take over the controls and fly.

She thought he was kidding  
but no and he promptly  
transfers control of the plane  
to her seat in the cockpit.  
Suddenly she is in charge—  
white knuckled—  
ham fisted thinking to herself  
“oh my god I’m flying this plane.”

(well sort of)  
 And then  
 after managing to keep the plane level  
 and the speed constant  
 her dad says to her  
 —“So—  
 how would you make the plane turn?”  
 She looked at him slightly panicked—  
 but he just nods  
 and so she swings  
 the inverted horseshoe shaped wheel  
 sharply to the right—  
 -way too hard  
 and all of the graphics  
 spin at a dizzying speed  
 and then to adjust—  
 she swings the wheel way too hard  
 back the other way—  
 -and by this time  
 her ersatz passengers  
 would be losing  
 their ersatz lunch.

And the advice  
 her dad offered to her that day  
 has stayed with her  
 oh so many years later.  
 He said, “ When you’re flying  
 be gentle  
 because it doesn’t take much movement  
 to really shift things around.”  
 It really doesn’t take much movement  
 to really shift things around....

Which brings us--  
 -to our skin wearing,  
 insect eating  
 prophet duJour:  
 John-- “I haven’t brushed my hair in months”—the Baptist.  
 John the Baptist  
 out in the wilderness  
 calling the people  
 of that time  
 in that place to repent—  
 which in the Greek  
 is known as metanoia.

Metanoia means either  
 repentance or changing one's mind.  
 So often  
 when we hear the word repentance  
 we think of it  
 in terms of a complete change,  
 a 180-degree turn,  
 a spiritual over haul and  
 sudden transformation.  
 And really  
     three weeks before Christmas  
 who has time for all that?  
 Who among us  
     really wants to change our lives that much?  
 Seriously.  
 And thus the words  
 of the prophet  
 from oh so long ago  
 get left  
 on the metaphorical banks  
 of the river Jordan.

We miss the whole point.  
 Because we think of repentance  
 as a cataclysmic  
 once in a life-changing action  
 —a pin-wheeling of our planes,  
 a back-bearing on our current compass course.

But as theologian William Herzog writes,  
 repentance--metanoia  
 can also refer to a small change...  
 and if one projects  
     a small change over a long enough time  
     a small change can become  
 [eventually] a life-altering event.

A slight course correction,  
 or a series of  
 discreet course alterations  
 over a period of time  
 eventually enable us  
 to wind up in a completely different spot  
 than we were originally heading.  
 As Andrea's dad said,  
 "It doesn't take much

to really shift things around.”

Theologically that means  
 that bit by bit, day by day  
 small moments of repentance  
 add up to real change.  
 It is I think  
 something of a theological lay-away plan.

Tuesday night—  
 I had a brief conversation  
 with one of our neighbors  
 who had come for groceries  
 and stayed for dinner.  
 I waved to her  
 and instead of walking on by  
 to get ready for some meeting—  
 I stopped and we talked.  
 She talked I listened.  
 She said  
 You have no idea how important this place is.  
 I’m trying to get another job—  
 I’ve been unemployed for four months now  
 and it really getting hard.  
 But because of this place  
 I at least have food.  
 It was then that the reality of hunger  
 hit me [again]  
 between the eyes.

I had been thinking of it  
 in terms of New York Times articles,  
 the vandalism we experienced  
 My righteousness  
 how dare someone violate my space.  
 I had in short  
 entered that nefarious place  
 of self-absorption.  
 But my conversation with Jennifer—  
 joggled the rudder of my plane.  
 Reminded me again---  
 that it is not about me  
 nor (thank God) this building.  
 Rather its about all of us  
 who come here hungry.  
 Longing to be fed—

physically and spiritually.

I didn't expect it  
—but it was a moment of repentance—  
of suddenly realizing  
how internally focused I'd gotten,  
taking a tiny step  
to look outside myself—  
one little step in a different direction.

In the end  
isn't that what Advent's all about.  
Risking taking small steps  
in a different direction,  
imperceptively but eventually  
altering the course of our lives.  
Practicing smidgens of metanoia  
until we have created real,  
long lasting change  
in ourselves, our souls, our world.  
Amen.