

On the Journey to a New Start
Revelation 22:1-5, 16-17 and Matthew 3:1-6
Women's Lectionary Lent 1

On this past Wednesday – Ash Wednesday – we entered the season of Lent in the liturgical calendar of the Church. Lent commemorates the time following Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, when he spent 40 days fasting in the desert and enduring temptation, before beginning his public ministry.

Traditionally, during Lent – in the interest of spiritual growth and renewal – we spend time alone in quiet meditation. We might alter our usual diet, eliminating favorite foods, or increasing our intake of others.

If ever there were the picture-perfect mascot for the season of Lent, John the Baptizer would be it. John is described as a scraggly, isolated eccentric, alone in the wilderness. He survives on a strange diet, limited to locusts and wild honey. He must be on one heck of a spiritual journey!

John's wilderness isolation, however, is interrupted by the throngs of people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region along the Jordan (we read in verse 5). As his nickname suggests, John goes about baptizing these folks as they confess their sins.

It is outside of the scope of today's gospel reading, but in verse 11, John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism: "I baptize you with water for repentance."

Probably most of us read the word "repentance" and assume it means saying you're sorry. Or, better yet, that you're really, really, sorry and will never do it again – whatever "it" is. But as is the case with many words that were originally written in Greek, much has been lost in translation.

Metanoia is the Greek word that has been translated as "repent" here, from *meta*, meaning "change" and *noia*, which means "mind." Today we would say, "change of heart" or "change of life." Repentance, or *metanoia*, is a thorough and ongoing shift and reorientation. A complete 180. A reversal of direction.

Repentance means turning around, starting over, taking another route, choosing another course. And John the Baptist's message about *metanoia* is completely appropriate for today because, during the season of Lent, we are on the journey to a new start.

John the Baptizer asks us to repent: to turn around, to focus on what is right and important and necessary, and what we will do differently. Repentance – *metanoia*, in short, is realizing that God is pointing you one way, you've been traveling another way, and changing course.

Now, you might be asking: What kind of new start? What can I repent of? What can we, as a congregation, repent of? What can we, as a community and a nation, repent of? Oh my goodness, there are so many things: Pollution and climate change. Poverty and food scarcity. Racial injustice and white supremacy. The lack of clean water. Overflowing prisons. The number of children still separated at the border from their families or living below the poverty level. Crime and violence. And the list goes on.

Wilda Gafney in [A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church](#) equates the "water of life" reference in the scripture text from Revelation to the waters of baptism when she says:

The water of life is a cosmic baptismal font, healing the world of all its brokenness and ills: sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, fat phobia, greed, cruelty, violence, and more. (p. 79)

Hear that again: the waters of baptism – the "waters of life" – heal the world. Baptism gives us a fresh start, a clean slate, a chance for repentance, for *metanoia*, for a complete 180.

Amanda Gorman, 24-year-old American poet and activist, shares with us how we, as individuals, can make an impact on a bigger scale. In the book I read to the children this morning, [Change Sings](#), she writes:

I'm the change I want to see.
I am just what the world needs.
I'm the voice where freedom rings.
You're the love your bright heart brings.

We are the wave starting to spring,
For we are the change we sing.
We're what the world is becoming,
And we know it won't be long.
We all hear change strumming.
Won't you sing along?

It's easy to get overwhelmed if we focus our attention on global issue-sized repentance. Indeed, that can get daunting real quick. Instead, maybe we should spend a little time this Lent daydreaming what God's vision for us (as individuals) might be. What is it that God wants me and you to be and to do?

And "daydreaming" might be the right word here, because God invites us to dream something beyond what we can presently see. You must have a vision of what the end goal is, in order to set a course to achieve that goal.

Maybe we can begin on a small scale. During this Lenten season, select one – just one! – element of your life of which you would like to repent, that is, change direction. Is there an unhealthy relationship you want to

repair or address? Is there a practice or habit you might want to take up that would improve your health or quality of life? Where might you want to do a 180? Of what do you wish to repent? Where are you looking for *metanoia* in your life?

I'll give you a moment to spend reflecting on where you need a new start this Lenten season.

As you continue to reflect on your plan for what you will repent of this Lent, reflect, too, on your baptism. Baptism signifies comprehensive conversion: a death to the "old" you and birth of the "new" you.

For John the Baptizer, his invitation to be baptized signals a radically open invitation to all to experience this *metanoia*. It is as if John is saying: "A new day, a new era is at hand! Change your minds and hearts and lives! Begin your journey to a new start!"

During this season of Lent, we are invited to embark on a journey to a new start, a new direction, a new path. God invites us to turn away from ideas, behaviors, and actions that divide us and to turn toward embracing wholeness, peace, and justice for all.

I pray we all experience some *metanoia* in our lives and in our world.

Let us pray:

Living, loving God, as we enter this season of Lent, help us to prepare our hearts and minds by repenting – changing course, starting fresh. Amen.