

Reading: Matthew 3:1-12

Advent 2

There are those who are good with directions and then there are those that aren't. I'm one of the latter group. I have been known to lose my way at night when looking for the convenience, but this has as much to do with not having my glasses on as with my directionality. What always fascinates me is that the more lost I am, the more likely someone is to ask me for directions. I have gotten other people lost over most of the English speaking world.

The Proclamation of the Good News of Jesus begins with John the Baptizer. I call him 'the baptiser' because he wasn't a Baptist. We all know that John was most likely an Anglican.

He bursts onto the pages of Scripture giving us directions. Repent. We tend to think of the word repent as meaning being sorry. But the Greek the word is *metanoia* which better translates, turn right around and go in the other direction.

I like the Message version. Verse 2 says: *[John's] message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: "Change your life. God's kingdom is here."* And from verse 7: *When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin!"*

John is calling for nothing short of a total redirection of our lives.

But what does this look like?

There can be no more reluctant convert to Christianity than Kirsten Powers, a writer for Newsweek magazine. If someone had told her she would one day trust this God that breaks into our lives she would have laughed.

She grew up an Anglican in Alaska, but her belief was superficial and flimsy. It was borrowed from her archaeologist father. She said, "Leaning on my father's faith got me through high school. But by university it wasn't enough. From my early 20s on, I never came close to considering that God could be real."

After university she worked in the White House surrounded by intellectual people who, if they had any deep faith in God, never expressed it.

She used to sometimes hear Christians talk about how terrible life must be for atheists. "But you don't know what you don't know" she said. "How could I have missed something I didn't think existed?"

So when she began dating a man who was into Jesus, she was shocked. "The week before I met him," she recounts "a friend had asked me if I had any deal breakers in dating." My response: "Just nobody who is religious."

A few months into our relationship, my boyfriend called to say he had something important to talk to me about. I remember exactly where I was he said, "Do you believe Jesus is your Saviour?" My stomach sank. I started to panic. *Oh no*, was my first thought. *He's crazy*.

Then he said the magic words for a liberal: "Do you think you could keep an open mind about it?" Well, of course. "I'm very open-minded!" (even though I wasn't at all.)

As he talked, conflict rose within me. On the one hand, I was creeped out. On the other hand, I had enormous respect for him. He was smart, educated, and intellectually curious. I remember thinking, *What if this is true, and I'm not even willing to consider it?*

A few weeks later I went to church with him. I was shocked and repelled by what I saw. *How am I going to tell him I can never come back?*

But then the vicar preached. I was fascinated. I had never heard a vicar talk about the things he did. The sermon was intellectually rigorous, weaving in art and history and philosophy. Soon, Sunday became the highlight of my week. I thought of it as just an interesting lecture—not really church. I left feeling frustrated: *Why did he have to ruin a perfectly good talk with this Jesus nonsense?*

I began to read the Bible. My boyfriend would pray with me for God to reveal himself to me.

Then one night I woke up in what felt like a strange cross between a dream and reality. Jesus came to me and said, "Here I am." It felt so real. I couldn't shake it. I started to fear I was going crazy.

I don't remember what was said that day. All I know is that, everything had changed. I'll never forget standing outside my apartment and saying to myself, "It's true. It's completely true." The world looked entirely different, like a veil had been lifted off it. I had not an iota of doubt. I was filled with indescribable peace.

Everywhere I turned, there he was. Slowly there was less fear and more joy.

In this Advent season are we open to God 'breaking into' our lives. Are we open to God completely turning our lives around. John uses powerful metaphors for this 'in-breaking' God: paths made straight, axes at the root of trees and of course the greatest of all the images of the 'in-breaking' God - baptism.

This Advent season we can go to all the lengths, including many parties, to shut God out or we can open ourselves again to Love.

If I decorate my house perfectly with tartan bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas biscuits, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the city mission, carol in the rest home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the tree with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of Christmas parties and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

Cell phones will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust, but giving the gift of love will endure.