

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year C
December 5, 2021
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Luke 3:1-18

“Change of Heart”

We love holiday movies in our house! Each year we have our list of “must watch” movies that we’ll put on while decorating our house and putting up the tree, at some point in the season I’ll start putting on not so classic, but still entertaining Hallmark Holiday movies. There is pretty much a Christmas movie playing constantly at our house in the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas. And after all these years of countless hours of viewing Hollywood holiday entertainment I’ve noticed that so many of these movies center around the theme of change and transformation. Whether it’s Ebenezer Scrooge finding meaning in generosity and caring for his fellow man, or the Grinch and his heart growing three sizes, or a big city junior executive learning to slow down and enjoy the simple things of life in a small Vermont town while falling for handsome local hunk, or George Bailey realizing that it is a wonderful life after all. It seems that again and again we turn to these stories of change, especially during this season.

Today it is the voice of John the Baptist that picks up the theme of change, as he preaches repentance and transformation. Luke’s setting of the scene is one that is ripe for a Hollywood director’s treatment. We begin with a wide shot high above the earth, then we zoom in on the city of Rome, on Emperor Tiberius’ grand palace, the bustle of servants and high ranking officials each tending to the very important business of Roman Empire. Then we pan to another Roman palace, this one of Pontius Pilate in Judea, quickly we travel once more into

each of the opulent dwellings of the Israelite kings, Herod and his brothers, before ending up in Jerusalem and panning through the great halls of the temple. And just before we think the camera will settle on the high priests Annas and Caiaphas in the holiest of holy places, we are once again transported this time out in the wilderness, far from the seats of power. Finally, the camera focuses in a wild looking man standing in the Jordan river and it is here where our story begins. Luke follows the traditional narrative cadence of the Old Testament writings when identifying prophets, first orienting us in time and space, giving us John's credentials in the form of his family lineage and with the tell-tale phrase – "the word of God came..." Indeed the word of God did come, not in the expected places, but on the margins to a prophet who called out to the people in the wilderness to change their lives and turn once again to God.

The NRSV Bible, which we most often use here, translates the Greek word "metanoias" as repentance, but it can also mean to change ones' mind. The Common English Bible in fact renders this phrase just a little bit differently in saying that John called "for the people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins." I like this variation in translation because the word repentance tends to get a little bogged down in religious baggage and this phrasing unpacks the meaning of repentance in more helpful ways. John urges the people to come and be baptized, not so that the people can participate in yet another religious ritual so they can feel better, but so that they might actually be changed by this action, they might understand God's work of redemption in their lives and in the world, and be transformed.

Change, however, we know is not very easily accomplished, at least relying on our own humanly ways. Changing a person's mind in these times seems downright impossible, let only

hearts and lives. We are more entrenched than ever in our silos of opinion and thought. Just reading the comments section of a simple news article online can elicit feelings of utter hopelessness as people harass and malign one another trying to assert their points of view. In trying to learn a little bit more about what, if anything, does change peoples minds and hearts, I learned – and this will either come as no surprise to you or as a shock – that facts, figures, a well-reasoned thought out argument, in most cases does little to nothing in changing a person’s mind. Often our positions on a given issue are rooted deeply in our beliefs and values, in our very identities, that even if we’re wrong, we’re certainly not going to admit that. The things though that do actually help change a person’s mind or at least leave them open to the possibility of change are empathy, trust, genuine relationship, asking curious questions, and being open to and at least listening to the other person’s position.ⁱ

Someone who is more than familiar with what it takes to not only change a person’s mind, but their whole mindset is Black musician Daryl Davisⁱⁱ. Davis may be a name that some of y’all from his music, he’s gotten to play with some of the greats – Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, BB King, just to name a few, but perhaps you’ve heard of him from his other gig – leading hundreds of Klu Klux Klan members to leave and disavow the hate group they once belonged to. What began with a chance encounter with a KKK member after a show grew into a life changing friendship that led Davis from bar halls and lounges to Klan rallies to the living room of the Klan’s Imperial Grand Dragon himself. Everywhere he went and with everyone he talked to Davis carried with him the question, “How are you going to hate me, when you don’t even know me?” It’s a question he’s been asking from a young age whenever he experienced racist

attitudes and behaviors from others. Davis describes his approach to changing the deeply entrenched beliefs of the Klan members he encounters by saying,

“The most important thing I learned is that when you are actively learning about someone else you are passively teaching them about yourself. So if you have an adversary with an opposing point of view, give that person a platform. Allow them to air that point of view, regardless of how extreme it may be. And believe me, I’ve heard things so extreme at these rallies they’ll cut you to the bone.

Give them a platform.

You challenge them. But you don’t challenge them rudely or violently. You do it politely and intelligently. And when you do things that way chances are they will reciprocate and give you a platform. So he and I would sit down and listen to one another over a period of time. And the cement that held his ideas together began to get cracks in it. And then it began to crumble. And then it fell apart.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There are those of course who are critical of Davis’ dialectical approach to stamping out racism in this country, and it may be true that his methods are not for all people in all situations. But his vast collection of Klan robes given to him by the men who have left the organization because of Davis’ conversations, because of his patience, care, and friendship, stand as a powerful testimony. He is a living breathing example of what psychologists have found over and over again in hundreds of studies – that with face-to-face interaction with a member of an “outgroup” prejudices is reduced over 90 percent of the time^{iv}.

John quotes the prophet Isaiah when he says “Prepare the way of the Lord.” So as we prepare ourselves this advent, what in the way? What are those things that are keeping us from

living in a fuller relationship with God and with one another? Is our shame, anger, resentments, cynicism, the need to be right, our fear – especially of failure, keeping us from seeking God and seeking change?

One of the most powerful messages of the advent and Christmas season is that change is possible. Daryl Davis' story reminds us that when we are loved and seen then we can be changed. No one is irredeemable. And this is how God loves us. In coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ, God was not content to just let us wander aimlessly back to God, but instead came into the world as one of us for us. While our focus in the season of advent is to prepare the way for the Lord into our hearts, God is already at work filling in the valleys, leveling the mountains and hills, making straight the crooked paths, and smoothing out the rough places, clearing the way for us to come back home.

ⁱ <https://www.bustle.com/p/9-genius-ways-to-change-someones-mind-according-to-science-2307178>
<https://www.bakadesuyo.com/2019/12/change-someones-mind/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58jHhNzUHm4>

ⁱⁱ https://www.ted.com/talks/daryl_davis_why_i_as_a_black_man_attend_kkk_rallies?language=en
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/mar/18/daryl-davis-black-musician-who-converts-ku-klux-klan-members>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/03/the-audacity-of-talking-about-race-with-the-klu-klux-klan/388733/>

^{iv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/26/opinion/racism-politics-daryl-davis.html>