

Metanoia

What is the purpose of religion?

What is the purpose of faith?

Some say these are intended to comfort us, especially in life's most difficult moments.

Others see a set of rules to follow, and if we do, there's a reward waiting at the end.

Still others see a social network where likeminded people can enjoy each other's company and do good things in the wider community.

Of course there are plenty of nay sayers too.

Karl Marx calls religion the opiate of the masses and Dr. Freud says that "Religion is a system of wishful illusions, ... a disavowal of reality, [creating] a state of blissful..... hallucinatory..... confusion."

I like Freud's line best because it asks the basic question: what is the nature of reality; what is the Really Real?

Jesus calls the "Really Real" the "Kingdom of God," and if we sit with Jesus for awhile, we come to see that it can't be defined, it can only be described.

It's like a tiny mustard seed that blooms into a weed that takes over the whole garden.

It's like tiny specks of yeast that, once mixed with dough, rises and expands and feeds tons of people.

It's like salt; just a little changes the taste of everything.

Things tiny, things insignificant, become the open window through which we might glimpse, if even for a moment, that which is Really Real.

Ever since the Enlightenment, we tend to define reality only by what our five senses can detect.

And yet, even scientists are coming to understand that reality is far more mysterious than the observable universe: with quantum physics discovering particles that exist in two places at once, that the mere act of observing changes the thing being

observed, and most amazingly, at least to me, is that the most basic ingredients in the universe might be vibrating strings: so that all of creation, at its core, is music.

You sense it sometimes, don't you, in the tingling that comes while gazing at a confoundingly beautiful sunset; or in the delightful wonder of a small child seeing her first snowfall; or in those brief instants where life's confusion suddenly is lifted, an insight given, when what seems to be meaningless suffering takes on profound depth, when the grace of God alights, if only for a moment, in the palm of your hand?

The Gospel of Luke this morning begins with this effort to crack us out of what seems to be real so we might begin to develop the eyes to see what is Really Real.

He begins by getting us off our couches and dragging us into the desert – where we are confronted not with a handsome preacher in an Armani suit, but by a bearded, smelly, half-dressed locust eater talking about --- metanoia.

Metanoia: now there's a word you probably didn't use this week!

Metanoia has come to mean "repentance;" which has come to mean, far too often, a sorrowful, breast-beating guilt trip over our many failures.

But that is not really the point of metanoia.

Metanoia means going beyond our mind.

It means being turned inside out and in the process of that discombobulation, coming face to face with the living God, who, incredibly, assures you that what you think are your worst failures in life are in fact priceless and necessary stepping stones to your salvation.

Metanoia takes us beyond the mind that too often says "I'm a loser" or "I'm in pain" – to a place where I can begin to forgive not only those who have wounded me, but where I can begin to forgive myself the wounds I carry.

Trust that and the window to the Really Real begins to open...

And while metanoia begins with each of us from the inside out, it also works on each of us, alone and in community, from the outside in.

And so Luke today, aside from confronting us with John the Baptist, also begins by ticking off the names of the rich and famous, the powerful and strong, as he brings us along the way to our own metanoia.

By introducing John and the soon to appear Jesus in the same breath as Caesar and Pilate and the high priests, Luke invites us to see that "God's mercy comes in the form of human weakness – two vulnerable children, Jesus and John, will grow up to change the world; while the symbol of human depravity and cruelty, the cross, becomes the means by which God transforms the world – so that people can at last have the eyes to see and the ears to hear that which is Really Real.

There is always something of the mustard-seed about the Kingdom of God – it creeps in, unnoticed, small and insignificant, until it grows and spreads, infesting whole fields and inviting all kinds of creatures to find safe harbor in its branches.

So Luke begins his story by making the outrageous claim that God is at work in the weak and small – babies and old barren women and unwed teenage mothers and wild-eyed prophets and itinerant preachers and executed criminals – it is these most unlikely people who change the world!" David Lose (paraphrase).

And that work continues today, in another group of completely unlikely people, people like you and me.

And as that work continues, what sometimes quickly, but more often slowly begins to happen is that we find ourselves moving away from the mindset of the crowd, moving away from the mindset of the prevailing culture, and toward putting on the mind of Christ – a mind that sees in all things the living presence of God, and in that seeing, comes to understand that no matter the hills or valleys of life, no matter the crooked pathways or raging streams: that we are all in God; and God is all in all.

This is a glimmer, a brief intuition, of what is Really Real.

We needn't go far to discover it – we already live in the midst of it.

But before we can see it, before we can hear it, we must be transformed.

On the one hand, it's not a hard thing to do, since we don't do it.

God does it for us.

But on the other hand, it is a frightening journey, because it means letting go of control.

It leads us into a rigorous self-evaluation so that we might face who we are before moving into the life of who we are called to become.

Frightening because God's way of living life is so different from my way.

What will **your** journey look like?

I have no idea....

Meister Eckhart, the great mystic, said **this** at the end of his life when his students wanted to know what technique to adopt or what book to read or what new teacher to seek out in order to find the transformation Jesus invites us into.

The mystic replied that none of these things are needed, but rather, he discovered that "....what seems trivial to us is important to God.

Therefore, treat everything in life the same, not comparing and wondering which is more important, or higher, or best.

We are simply to follow where God leads, by doing what we feel most inclined to do, by going where we feel pushed to go -- to those places where we feel most drawn."

"If we do that," the mystic promises, "God gives us his greatest in our least, and never fails." Meister Eckhart, paraphrased.

Meaning, "our job is not to be Mother Theresa, nor is it to be St. Francis - it's to do what is ours to do.

Which is what St. Francis himself says as he lay dying:

"I have done what was mine to do, now you must do what is yours to do."
R. Rohr, Everything Belongs, 97.

May you do what is yours to do, my friends, and you too shall enter into the metanoia of God.

+amen.