I don’t know about you, but I am profoundly affected by the seasons. My mood, my energy, my perspective on the state of the world, or the state of my own spirit, tend to flow and shift in cycles that mirror the natural world. I’ve been reminded of this in recent days, as the sun has made a cautious return, peeking behind clouds, visiting for hours and even days at a time. The old English word from which the season of Lent takes its name means “spring,” which makes a lot of sense for those of us who seem to be waking up these days, shaking off the cold and damp of winter, the gloom and grey of recent months. In this sense, though Lent it is a season of repentance and self-examination, it is not primarily about curling in on ourselves or shutting the world out. Instead, Lent is about attending to what God is already doing within us. It is about slowing down and noticing how God is bringing us to bud, breathing us to blossom, waiting patiently as we brighten to full bloom.

A few months ago, I was talking about my work as a priest with someone who was unfamiliar with Christianity, and as I described my ministry and my sense of the life to which we’ve been called, he laughed and said, “Huh. You seem to assume that people are really interested in changing.” It struck me as such a fundamentally true reflection of what I’d just been saying that I had to pause for a moment before I agreed that, yes, being a disciple of Jesus means we are fundamentally willing to change: to grow, to stretch, to learn. It’s not that we Christians don’t like ourselves. Or that we’re not called to love and honor and cherish who we are right here and now. It’s just that we also assume the dynamic, creative, life-giving Spirit of God is still active in the world, and still active in our lives, which means we don’t expect to be the same person tomorrow that we are today. We expect God to keep shaking us up, keep calling us forward, keep inviting us up and out of ourselves, until “thy kingdom come.”

So the life of faith involves a willingness to be re-made, re-formed, re-shaped, not because there’s something wrong with us but because the possibilities for who we will become in Christ are endless, infinite, and inspiring. Which brings us to a defining feature of our Lenten observance: repentance. “Repent, and believe in the good news!” Jesus cries, at the beginning of
his ministry. “Repent,” he continues, “for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.” Repent! Jesus proclaims this like it is an invitation, an opportunity, a gift. But I wonder what comes to mind when you hear this word? Does it make you think of a self-degrading exercise? As though God needs us to apologize for all the ways we don’t measure up? Make a list of all our faults and failings so we can worthily lament them? Is that what repentance is, really? Feeling bad about not only what we have done and failed to do but who we are? Saying sorry?

Ultimately, repentance is about our willingness to change and be changed by God. But change takes many forms. Sometimes, we welcome it. We are ready and eager, either excited or desperate enough to take a leap of faith. At other times change comes rather naturally and feels rather good, like the seed that is sprouting, softening and opening, sending forth a tender shoot, reaching eagerly for the sun, growing stronger and more beautiful as it flowers and bears fruit. (Or like a person sloughing of the weight of winter.) But there are others times when change feels unwelcome: hard, heavy, even scary.

The word “repentance” simply to turn: turn around, turn away, go turn a new direction. In calling us to repent, even when our resistance to it is great, Jesus assumes we are capable of growing, learning, changing. Jesus assumes we are ready for something new, something more: a deeper connection to God and one another; a more robust sense of meaning in our lives; a transformed existence; a transformed creation, even. But it is hard to turn if we are not ready and willing to acknowledge where we are. How we got so lost or so stuck or so sick. What choices have we made that brought us to this place? What habits are inhibiting our freedom? What attachments and addictions have we surrendered ourselves to? Acknowledging these things is never fun, but it serves and important purpose: we learn more about where we want to go by examining how we got precisely where we are. The point is not simply to feel badly, but to acknowledge what currently is as God prepares us to move on.

Turning. Re-turning. It’s a bit closer to what God is preparing us for in this Lenten season, this springtime for the soul. But there’s an even more nuanced definition of repentance. The Greek word Jesus uses this morning is “metanoia,” which translates much more closely to “having a change of heart,” or even “snapping out of it.” Repent … and allow your heart to be softened. Repent … and allow yourself to be shaken out of the haze. Repent … and wake up!

It is a liberating lesson, but in today’s Gospel, it doesn’t sound like very good news. Jesus is being rather harsh. Some people have come to him lamenting the fate of some Galileans who
were murdered and had their blood was mingled with the sacrifices. The people can’t make sense of it, and it seems like their only explanation is to blame the victim. Such a terrible fate! Surely they did something to deserve it. They’re also grieving the random, tragic death of 18 crushed by the tower of Siloam. And, yet again, they seem to shifting some moral burden onto the shoulders of the dead. Surely, they were terrible transgressors. There’s just no other explanation. And Jesus has little patience for them. For this kind of thinking. Jesus is bumping up against a kind of legalistic framework for life, for salvation: a story that says that if you are kind and compassionate and live rightly, good things will always follow, but if you sin and offend and transgress, watch out! You just might find yourself bleeding in the temple or crushed by tragedy. Tit for tat. Fair is fair.

It makes a certain kind of sense, though, right? This is, still, a very prominent way of looking at the world today, best exemplified in Christian tradition by what we call the prosperity Gospel. We can all fall into assuming things are, or ought to be, fair. That justice is about getting what we earn or deserve. It was certainly the framework of righteousness in Jesus’ time, but there is very little that seemed to set his blood to boiling more. Wake up! He seems to be saying this morning. Snap out of it! You do not live in a world organized around fairness. We do not worship a God concerned with fairness. That thinking is just too small. The Galileans and those struck down in the accident – they didn’t deserve it, he says. It might make you feel better to think that way, because it gives you some sense of control over an uncontrollable situation, but that’s just lazy theology. That’s just victim-blaming. That’s just scapegoating to make yourselves feel better. Bad things happen and we can’t always explain them. Incredible things happen and we almost never deserve them. Such is life. What Jesus cannot tolerate is this distancing of the self from those who suffer, as though their hardship is contagious, their bad luck catching, their pain a moral burden. “No …” he says. “But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” It almost sounds threatening, but I don’t think that’s how Jesus intended it.

Milton Erickson was born in Nevada in the early 1900s. It was the wild, wild west, and he was raised on a busy, bustling cattle farm. He was intensely curious as a child, always observing the adults and the animals around him, trying to understand why they did what they did. One day, his father was having a particularly difficult time moving the cows across their pasture. He had dismounted from his horse and was trying to drag one by her ears forward. It was, not surprisingly, not going well. Milton watched his father toil fruitlessly for a while, and
noticed that when pulled forward the cows only reared back harder. They didn’t want to go forward, and yanking them actually made them resist more. As his dad and the other cowboys regrouped to come up with a new plan, Milton dismounted. He walked behind the largest cow, grabbed its tail, and gave it a firm yank. His father was horrified as he watched from a few feet away, not quite close enough to stop the boy, and terrified that the cow would turn around and ram him. But instead the cow was so startled by the tug that it jumped up and leaped forward. Milton followed, tugging on the tail once more, which led the cow to begin walking at a brisk pace. The other animals followed course, and Milton calmly went back and hopped up on his horse, followed by the various grown men, who were amazed at what they’d just seen. Erickson went on to become a pioneering and controversial figure in the new field of psychiatry, known for his counterintuitive interventions and unusual approaches, but celebrated for his success moving clients forward. Helping them to grow and change, no matter how unorthodox his methods.

Jesus wants us to be free from the things that are keeping us stuck. Our limiting ideas of ourselves. Our guilt and shame. Our small-mindedness. Our prejudice and our fear. And sometimes he’s going to come along and invite us forward and it will be easy to follow, but sometimes we are going to dig our heels in, stubborn as all get out, and Jesus will not be deterred. He’ll say strange sounding things to jolt us out of complacency; he’ll say disturbing things we can’t help but argue with; he’ll give us an unwelcome tug – anything! - if it makes us turn, return, have a change of heart, snap out of it. Jesus is not willing to see us perish. It is just not in the cards. Repent, he says instead. Like it is an invitation, and opportunity, a gift. Repent, and believe in the good news. Springtime has come, and tomorrow is a new day. Amen.