May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

“*What then should we do*?” (Lk 3:10b). The question in today’s gospel strikes at the very core of our being. It comes to us in many different ways.

Sometimes we realize something about ourselves or our life; we recognize a truth and know we need to make a change. Or maybe we recognize a particular behavior or pattern of how we think, act, see, relate to others, ourselves, the world, or God. We do the same thing over and over and nothing seems to change. There is no movement or growth. Perhaps for the first time we acknowledge the reality of addiction. Or maybe we have lived with a deep sense of unhappiness or restlessness. And we are left wondering, “What do I do now?”

Other times, the loss of a loved one, a divorce, a shattered dream, betrayal of a friend, the last child that grows up and moves out all leave us asking, “What do I do now?”

Regardless of how it comes about, that question brings us to a crossroads. It is a place of discernment and decision and ultimately a place of repentance. We must begin looking for a new direction for our life. It is the question today’s gospel sets before us. It is asked three times – by the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers.

Today’s gospel is the continuation of last week’s gospel. John the Baptist is in the wilderness proclaiming repentance, echoing the Prophet Isaiah’s words “*Prepare the way of the Lord,*” (Lk 3: 4) and reminding us that all flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord. If last week’s gospel was a call to repentance then today’s gospel demands action. Repentance requires action. The Word of God always seeks from us a response. And that is exactly what John the Baptist demands of those who come to him. He has challenged them to *bear fruits worthy of repentance*.

Many years ago, my Franciscan friend and mentor pointed out to me some hard truths about my life. I remember asking him, “So what should I do now?” He looked at me and simply said, “Go do the next right thing.” That was not an answer that I either understood or wanted. As our discussion continued I realized he was not telling me to go fix my life all at once. He was only asking me to take the first step in a new direction. “What should I do after that,” I asked him. His answer was the same. “Go do the next right thing. And after that go do the next right thing.” He set me on a path of repentance. These small and simple, though not necessarily easy, steps would become life changing behaviour.

That is exactly what John the Baptist tells those who ask him, “*What should we do?* (Lk 3:10b). He tells the crowd to share their food with those who are hungry and have none. If they have two coats they are to give one to someone who has no coat. It is not hard to figure out. It is the next right thing to do. To the tax collectors he says act fairly, be honest in your dealings with other people, do not take more than owed you. It is the next right thing to do. And he tells the soldiers not to abuse their power, to not manipulate others, and to not create more victims. It is the next right thing to do. John did not tell any of them to go and be something different. Instead he called them to be who they are but in a different way. He did not tell the tax collectors to go find an honest living. He asked of them honest tax collecting. He did not tell the soldiers to stop being soldiers but to be soldiers who respected others and understood the danger of power. He called the crowds to remember that their life is bound up in their neighbor’s life and there is no room for indifference or miserly giving.

Repentance is not just about us. It is connected to and happens in relationship with God and our neighbor. It always restores and gives life. It is not about escaping the circumstances of our life but about engaging those circumstances in a new and different way – God’s way. Repentance opens us to see ourselves and each other as we really are in God. It fills us with the joyful expectation of the one who is more powerful, the Messiah.

So I wonder, what is the next right thing for your life? Identify that and you will have discovered a place of repentance, a place of the good news, and ultimately the place where the Messiah is coming to you.

It is Advent. So go and do the next right thing. Amen.