

Do you remember when there were monsters under your bed? Or breathing, moving mummies in your closet? Or werewolves just on the other side of your bedroom door? Or aliens in the cornfields outside your window? (OK, that last one might be mostly a Midwestern thing.)

Maybe I was a scaredy-cat to an unusually high degree as a child. (I know I am as an adult; we had a ghost-story-teller come to SASSY a couple of months ago, and that night I almost had myself convinced I was going to be visited by a see-through Confederate soldier.) I can remember many, many scary nights from younger years; nights when I would turn on my bedside lamp and pull all my arms and legs and fingers and toes under the covers to feel safe, and then I would try to fall asleep while also keeping an eye on my closet door and my ears trained for any strange noises. I remember how hot my neck would feel and the way my mind would spin through all the scary images I'd ever seen, even while I tried to get myself to stop thinking about all those made-up stories and just go. to. sleep.

And then a sweater would fall off a hangar in my closet, and I'd sit straight up in bed and think, "I KNEW IT! There's really a mummy in there and werewolves are probably real and a flying saucer is landing in the corn field RIGHT NOW."

When I was in that scared mental state, dwelling on all the scary things that could be happening in my bedroom, every creak in the night, every sweep of car lights through the curtains, every strange shape in the darkness confirmed the thoughts I was already thinking.

Humans tend to do that sort of a thing. We have thoughts and anxieties and opinions and interpretations in our heads, and when we look out at our world and get new information, we see a lot of that information as confirming what we've already been thinking...and we kind of forget about the stuff that might challenge our thoughts. The official term for that habit is "confirmation bias", and it is actually one of my biggest fears.

I see confirmation bias working in myself all the time. I see it in my anxieties: Especially this time of year I'm constantly thinking, "I don't have enough time! Work is crazy, and I've got to get presents for my family, and oh no my family's coming, and I've got to clean up, and I'll just never get those extra projects done...How am I ever going to get some rest in?" And then of course that thought cycle keeps me up at night and wakes me up early, which makes me believe even more strongly in how stressed I am, and how there's not enough time to rest, and then I think of a few more things I have to do, and all those extra social events on the calendar in December, and I come to believe more and more strongly that I don't have enough time and I'll never feel rested or peaceful ever again. I look around for everything that proves how stressful life is.

Confirmation bias happens when we think someone doesn't like us, and then we interpret everything they do as a subtle snub. It happens when we feel like we're not good enough, and then we start listing all the ways we don't measure up. It happens when we read the Bible, understanding whatever we read only as it fits into what we already think. And I think we all know how much it happens with our political views.

The reason confirmation bias scares me so much is that it keeps us stuck in our loops. It keeps us stuck in the way things are. It keeps us headed down the same path; entrenched in the same problems; living with the same stresses over and over. How is change going to happen if we're closed off to it, always looking for more of the same?

John the Baptist was sent to deal with this problem. He was born to "prepare the way of the Lord" – and that meant getting people ready for the big changes that the messiah was about to bring.

Looking at today's gospel reading, I'm wondering if his game plan was to try and shock people out of their complacency and their mental loops. He was a wild man: wearing strange clothes, eating bugs, and I always imagine his hair and beard so crazy, they would put Albert Einstein to shame. He camped out in the wilderness – a place that represents wildness, unsettledness, change – and there in the wilderness he shouted wild things: "Repent, change, get ready, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" He called the most respected community leaders broods of vipers, he told them to watch out for what God was doing. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees, ready to start chopping!"

Whatever his plan was, it seemed to work on at least some people: they came to the Jordan river to confess their sins, to be baptized, and to repent – that is, to change their ways of thinking and being, to open their lives to what God was doing.

Advent is the season when the church reminds us to prepare the way of the Lord, the season when we are to be like those people flocking to the wild man at the river. It's the time to open ourselves to the changes God is calling forth in our own time and place, even in our own everyday lives. But what can shake us out of our habits of thinking and being, like John shook up those people?

As an answer – or at least an offering -- I'd like to tell another story.

It's an old story about a shepherd whose grazing fields lay near the road connecting two villages. Once a traveler, coming from the west, paused for a break along his journey and struck up a conversation with the shepherd. "I'm travelling from village to village, trying to see more of the world," the traveler told the shepherd. "I'm heading on to the next village, just east of here. What's it like?"

The shepherd asked, "Well, what was the village you're coming from like?"

"Oh, it was awful. The people weren't friendly at all; I don't think they have any manners. And we didn't speak the same language, so that made it almost impossible to communicate. The only

place they offered me to sleep was this thing called a hammock that hangs off the ground; I couldn't figure out what they were serving to eat, it was so weird; and their customs just put me off."

The shepherd responded, "I expect that you'll find pretty much the same thing in the next village." The traveler sighed, nodded, and continued on his way.

Later that afternoon another world-traveler came along, coming from the same village to the west, and stopped to talk to the shepherd. "What's the next village like?" he asked.

"Well, what was the village you're coming from like?" the shepherd replied.

"Oh, it was so interesting!" the traveler said. "The people were so different from me or anybody else I've ever known. We didn't speak the same language, but we figured out how to communicate with gestures and signs. They don't sleep in beds, but in hanging hammocks – I'd never done that before! And their food had this amazing flavor – oh, they invited me to this dance ceremony they were having – I'd never seen anything like it!"

The shepherd responded, "I expect that you'll find pretty much the same thing in the next village."

This is the story of two men and their patterns of thinking; each of them saw the world a certain way, and so even when what was going on around them changed, what was going on inside them stayed pretty much the same. It's that old confirmation bias thing again.

But there is an important difference between these two men. The first man had a thought pattern that closed him off to new things: experiences, people, and information. If it was not like him or what he knew, there was no chance he was gonna like it. His defenses were always up. You probably noticed that thought pattern was not bringing him much joy.

Our culture often encourages that sort of thought pattern in us, telling us things like: standing our ground is *the* sign of strength; winning the argument is what's important; people who think differently are stupid and wrong or hateful or misguided. Things like listening, considering other opinions, questioning our own beliefs – things like that don't get a lot of air time.

In the story the second man had an entirely different thought pattern. He practiced an hospitable curiosity. When he encountered something new, he opened himself to it. If he encountered a new way of doing something, he gave it a try. If he met a person with different beliefs or customs, he tried to understand how they saw the world.

Curiosity keeps us open. It does not mean we can't stay true to ourselves, our understanding of the world, or our personal preferences. Trying out a hammock for a few nights did not mean that man was going to disavow mattresses; considering what another person believed did not mean he was going to change his own mind. But curiosity can help keep us from getting stuck in our loops; it can help us hear at those times when God is calling us to change.

What if we made a habit of trying to look at the world differently every day? What if we tried looking around our lives for all the ways we have more than enough time? What if we tried looking for all the evidence that the world is full of kind people? What if we tried understanding another person's political or social or religious views: What are they afraid of? What do they hope for? What if we tried putting ourselves in uncomfortable situations? What if we tried asking someone who is especially different from us: "What's it like to be you?"

Intentionally practicing curiosity is like keeping the door open for God to come into our lives and make some changes. It's a way to "prepare the way of the Lord" whom we can never quite predict – who is never-endingly working to make us into new creations.