Grant, we beseech you, Almighty God, that your word only may be spoken, and your Word only be received, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A few years ago, well maybe more than just a few years ago, Hollywood released a film story about a young girl falling in love. The theme song from this film became a number one hit. Soon, a huge number of families named their baby girls, guess what…Tammy. Hollywood seems to have a real effect on culture, often moving people to do things that greatly effect their families, such as naming their children after movie characters or actors.

However, if people picked names on the basis of historical importance, the world today would be full of Orville’s and Wilbur’s.

But it is not.

Still, few people have changed the course of history more than the Wrights brother of Dayton, Ohio. One hundred twelve years ago this coming week, these bicycle-making brothers soared into space with the Wright stuff at the command of a small, bi-wing airplane, achieving an astounding altitude of 30 feet. In the process, they developed steering techniques that are still being used in 21st century aircraft, spacecraft, submarines, and the newly develop drones.

On December 17, 1903, Orville took off from the Outer Banks of North Carolina, near Kitty Hawk, and flew the gasoline powered Wright Flyer for 12 seconds. Later that same day, Wilbur piloted the same plane for 59 seconds, covering a distance of 852 feet. Thus the two of them became the world’s first famous flyers, and also the world’s first frequent flyers. Their accomplishment brought about the advent of the aeronautics age.

Excited beyond belief, they telegraphed the following message to their sister Katherine: “We’ve actually flown more than 500 feet! Will be home for Christmas.” Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, “How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas.” He totally missed the real news, the big news – man had flown!

On that day, people started to think differently. What had been heretofore impossible was now possible. Worlds that before December 17, 1903, were inaccessible are now easily accessible. Microsoft’s developer, Bill Gates, put it into perspective when he said,
“The Wright Brothers created the single greatest cultural force since the invention of writing. The airplane became the first World Wide Web, bringing people, languages, ideas, and values together.”

Not many such days come along in history when people from that moment on start to think differently. We have had a few in our own time. The day Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak jerry-rigged a computer in their garage develop the first Apple Computer, or the day when the B-29 Super Fortress Enola Gay dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

The day a baby was born in Bethlehem is such a day. With His birth, everything changed. Witness the fact that 2,000 years later, we are still talking about the meaning and impact of that life which came into the world one night so long ago. And not only talk, about the birth of Jesus. Thousands of people will travel many hundreds of miles to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to see a production called, Miracle of Christmas. Three weeks ago, Barbie, our grandson, Jon, and I were among the thousands that made that journey and experienced a wonderful time of deepened spirituality. Through this marvelous production, we relived the times, places and event surrounding the day that changed the world forever – the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

There was another remarkable day, about thirty years after the birth of Christ, and it was the day that John the Baptist said, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming: and I am not worthy even to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).

This was more from John than just a call to be baptized. Included in Baptism also is a call for repentance. “You brood of vipers!” John says to the crowd by the River Jordan. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Luke 3:7). John blasts these baptisms seekers, comparing them to a nest of poisonous snakes slithering away from a fiery doom. Like the prophets before him, John speaks of divine judgment and the wrath of God, predicting that an overpowering force from heaven will come to destroy the wicked of the world.

Like the Wright Brothers of Dayton, Ohio, John is not interested in staying home tinkering with the bicycles of his friends and neighbors. Instead, he turns his back on the comforts of community life and takes off in an unexpected direction. He powers up his own prophetic voice with a powerful call for repentance.

John shouts, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance (verse 8). Turn yourself around and get yourself in line with the righteousness of God. If you have two coats, give one to a person who doesn’t have one. If you are a tax collector, collect no more than what is right. If you are a soldier, don’t extort anyone by means of threats or accusations. Such is righteous and ethical living,” says John, “and you better start practicing it if you want to escape divine judgment.”

How might the world be different if we did more than just think about repentance, and in this season of new things, actually repent of what is hurtful, harmful, and hateful? How
might this world be different if we started to think about what is petty, demeaning, and belittling?

On a British Airways flight from Johannesburg, a middle-aged well-off white South African lady found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the cabin crew attendant over to complain about her seating.

“What seems to be the problem, madam?” asked the attendant.

“Can’t you see?” she said. “You have sat me next to a kaffir. I can’t possibly sit next to this disgusting human being. Find me another seat!”

“Please calm down, Madam,” the stewardess replied. “The flight is very full today, but I will tell you what I will do – I will go and check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class.”

The woman cocks a snooty look at the outraged black man beside her – not to mention also to many of the surrounding passengers. A few minutes later, the stewardess returns with the good news, which she delivers to the lady, who cannot help but look at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin: “Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. I have spoken to the cabin services director, and the club is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class.”

Before the lady has a chance to answer, the stewardess continues, “It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, however, and I had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person.”

With that, she turned to the black man sitting next to the woman, and said, “So, if you’d like to get your things, sir, I have your seat up front in first class ready for you…”

At which point, the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation while the black man was escorted up to the front of the plane.

John the Baptist said that we ought to be seeking righteous and ethical living if to escape divine judgment. Is today the day we start to think and act differently? The bottom line for John is that we have to conform our lives to the will of God. A strong spiritual heritage and a righteous religious résumé are not the wings upon which we can pull up and away from the fire of divine judgment. “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor!’” warns John; “For I tell you, God is able from these very stones to raise up children to Abraham” (verse 8).

We are the “children of Abraham.” This was a common refrain among the ancient Hebrew people. It was like a free pass. Judgment? No way! We are children of Abraham! Repentance? No need. We are children of Abraham.
John was speaking to a generation that saw themselves as privileged, as exempt, as beyond repentance; not unlike the condescending lady on the plane. The parallel with our own times should be obvious. This is the Christmas season, yet the baby Jesus is scarcely visible in the manger, the Christ child is almost invisible to the consumer, and the season has no reason except for office parties, consumer spending and gift-giving.

John is saying to us, “Forget Abraham! For get your heritage!” God could raise up children of Abraham from these stones on the ground. What God can’t find are people that bear the fruits of repentance!

Now the people are starting to think differently! This is an aha moment. It’s a Wilbur and Orville moment. New ideas. New Worlds. New possibilities. New territory. John presents a radical new approach to the world. Abraham is not the center of the universe. God is. So get use to it!

And then John introduces the One who is The Center of the Universe, the One who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Is this what Advent ought to be about? You bet it is. Advent is about meeting the Center of the Universe personally. Meeting the Christ indvidually. To changing your thinking. To find a new source of spiritual power, and then turning that spiritual power into the mighty wind that God has blown across the centuries of human life.

Power and wind. Sounds like a formula for flying, doesn’t it? As “On Eagle’s Wings.”

Jesus the Messiah baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire; the same Spirit bestowed upon the disciples in the upper room, the same Spirit all of us received at our baptism, and invites us to soar with him into a life of repentance and righteousness.

Make this Advent be a time for you to think differently, that you may become Christ’s change agent in the world. You can do it, for you already have within you the enabling Spirit of God given to you at Baptism. Now, being fully equipped, it all boils down to a matter of will.

The decision is yours.